

Research Article

Building a Multilingual Republic: An Interview with Dr. Lava Deo Awasthi, Founding Chair of Nepal's Language Commission

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2025.9734>

Abstract

This contribution is an edited version of a wide-ranging conversation between linguistic anthropologist and past co-editor of *HIMALAYA*, Mark Turin, and Lava Deo Awasthi, the first Chairperson of Nepal's Language Commission. In the course of the interview, Turin and Awasthi discuss the Commission's role and establishment, Awasthi's appointment to the position of Chairperson, his intellectual training and administrative preparation for the task, and the strategic goals and objectives that he brought to the portfolio. The conversation then moves on to a critical reflection of the challenges and achievements of Awasthi's term as Chairperson, concluding with his vision for mother tongue instruction and linguistic justice in Nepal.

Keywords

federalism, language, linguistic justice, mother tongue, Nepal, policy,

Recommended Citation

Turin, Mark and Awasthi, Lava D. (2025). Building a Multilingual Republic: An Interview with Dr. Lava Deo Awasthi, Founding Chair of Nepal's Language Commission. *HIMALAYA* 44(1): 164-174.



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1. What is the role of Nepal's Language Commission and when was it formed?

To fulfil the promises of the new federal state, the Constitution of Nepal (2015) created a Language Commission (LC) with the following four core mandates: (a) to develop eligibility criteria for gaining status as an official language and offer recommendations to the Government of Nepal about the official language(s) in each province; (b) to offer recommendations to the Government about measures to be taken for the conservation, promotion, and development of languages; (c) to suggest possible ways of using mother tongues in education by assessing their stage of development; and, (d) to conduct studies, carry out research, and perform monitoring functions on the response to the constitutional provisions for the federalization of languages in Nepal. In addition, the Constitution made the Language Commission responsible for making recommendations on all matters regarding official languages. The Language Commission Act, 2017, elaborates on the functions as stipulated in the Constitution. The Commission was founded in 2016 (Kamat 2016).

2. By what process and in what year were you appointed as its first Chairperson?

As per the provision of the Constitution of Nepal, the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, the Government of Nepal appointed me as the first Chairperson of the Language Commission. The process for the appointment was initiated by the Ministry of Culture, which is a liaison ministry for the Language Commission. Article 287 of the Constitution states that 'the Government of Nepal shall, no later than one year of the commencement of this Constitution, constitute a Language Commission...'. The Constitution came into effect on 20 September 2015, and it was therefore mandatory that the Government form the Commission within the constitutional timeframe. Recognizing the urgency of the matter,

the Government searched for an appropriate candidate to be presented to the Council of Ministers. The qualifications stipulated in sub-clause (4) of Article 287 of the Constitution for the Chairperson or a member of the Commission were as follows: (a) a master's degree in a related subject from a recognized university; (b) at least twenty years of experience in the fields of study, teaching, and research on various languages of Nepal; (c) at least forty-five years old; and (d) high moral character (Constitution of Nepal 2015). Since I met all the criteria specified by the Constitution, I was encouraged to apply and advised by the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers to resign from my post as permanent secretary of the Government because the Chairperson of the Commission had an independent and constituent portfolio. The Cabinet of Ministers appointed me as the Chairperson of the Commission in September 2016. I assumed the post of Chairperson after resigning from my civil service post and receiving approval from the cabinet.

3. What in your own professional and educational background helped to prepare you for the role?

I have worked with the Government of Nepal for about thirty years, alongside holding teaching appointments at universities across Nepal. Prior to assuming the role of the Chairperson of the Commission, I served as permanent secretary to the Government of Nepal and worked as the Chief Administrator of the Central Development Region. I was appointed as Director General of the Department of Education and completed my assignments as Joint Secretary at the Planning, Monitoring and Educational Administration Divisions of the Ministry of Education. I gained valuable experience working in different capacities at district, regional, and central level institutions while serving in the government system. In addition, I have taught courses on the English language, language policy and

planning, English literature, linguistics, philosophy, diversity education, oriental cosmologies, and advanced research methodologies as a visiting professor at Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University for more than three decades. Later, I also started supervising MPhil and PhD students at Far Western University in Mahendranagar, Kanchanpur. I have served on research committees and supported MPhil and PhD students at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, Far Western University, Pokhara University, and Nepal Sanskrit University. I have served on various committees and task forces commissioned by the Government at policy and implementation levels and have attended professional courses and presented papers on language policy, language planning, linguistic diversity, curriculum designing, and classroom pedagogies at national and international forums.

I hold master's degrees in English literature from Tribhuvan University, Nepal, and in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from the University of Leicester, UK. I earned my PhD in language policy from the Danish University of Education, Denmark.

My PhD project was dedicated to making sense of Nepal's social construct of and commitment to multilingualism, exploring the persistence of monolingual school practices in the face of constitutional promises and state commitments to multilingualism (Awasthi 2004). I conducted a survey of Nepal's languages and carried out a qualitative study of the Tharu language in the district of Bardiya (Bellamy 2009). I analyzed language policy statements and explored classroom pedagogies in schools. I documented how local authorities (including education personnel), members of school management committees, head teachers, and parent representatives seemed to promote the Nepali language and English language even though the constitution enshrines mother tongue medium education as a fundamental right (Article 31).

Furthermore, teachers seemed to show a tendency to resist change and maintain the status quo because they were not consulted when new educational language policies were introduced into schools.

Teachers also exhibited a deeply held adherence to the *Gurukul* education system, which appears to have been harnessed as a way to resist newer pedagogical ideologies imported from the West (Joshi and Gupta 2017). The *Gurukul* tradition is deeply connected to Nepal's ancient Vedic heritage and refers to the process by which a student stays in a teacher's home for an extended period until the disciple has accomplished mastery in the subject matter and has become an enlightened person. The core components of the *Gurukul* curriculum include competencies in Vedic knowledge, spirituality, self-discipline, empathy, compassion, and humanism. Historically, at least, the Sanskrit language played a major role in the transmission of knowledge from the master, or *guru*, to the *shiksha*, the disciple.

Recognizing how ingrained these rich traditions of knowledge transmission are, I wanted to understand why the students' engagement in the learning process appeared to have dwindled, creating a gap between children's home languages and the language(s) of the school. While statutory provisions for education in the mother tongue are oriented towards promotion, classroom pedagogies have remained resolutely monolingual and exclusionary. The result is that the multilingual education policies that have been introduced in Nepal have not resulted in meaningful changes in classroom practices.

My research was also a reflection of the childhood traumas I had experienced at the earliest stage of formal education. My home language, Baitadeli, has a strong oral tradition and no written literature (National Statistics Office 2021). English is my fifth language in terms of exposure and competence, and my home district of Baitadi is

well-known for its loyalty to the local language. I had to drop out of school after completing my sixth grade. Staying at home, I received greater attention from my family and had much greater exposure to my native language, culture, and environment. My overall impression is that dropping out of school had a surprisingly positive impact on my life. The opportunity offered a surprising dividend for me as I gained mastery in my mother tongue and received extensive exposure to folk literature, Indigenous knowledge, and survival skills, thereby cultivating my interest in language, culture, literature, and local cosmologies.

Now that I reflect on it, I appreciate how language has always played a key role in my life. I grew up in a multilingual environment, brought up with Baitadeli, Hindi, Sanskrit, Nepali, and English. Language played a major part in my decision to leave school, and my later success is deeply linked to my competence in several languages. When I dropped out of school, I learned far more meaningful things from my grandparents, parents, and family members, as well as from the wider community. It was rewarding to be at home with my family as I gained mastery in my mother tongue, which in turn helped me to harness and refine my art of living. Languages mattered so much to me because they proved to be both software and hardware. Later, when I was in secondary school, I realized that my command of my home language contributed significantly to enhancing my English and Nepali. I used my mother tongue as a form of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) to strengthen my competence in both English and Nepali. My deep connection with my family and community members provided me with a firm foundation for making headway in other languages. By networking with language communities, university professionals, government officials, and educational practitioners at local, national, and international levels, I gained the necessary confidence

to embark on the daunting task of being the first Chairperson of Nepal's Language Commission.

4. In your term as the Commission's first Chairperson, what were your strategic goals and objectives?

My first strategic goal was to create an environment conducive to implementing the provisions of the Constitution of Nepal in relation to language. My priority was to prepare a detailed action plan for my six-year tenure in consultation with language stakeholders, including language experts, experienced professionals, language activists, Indigenous community members, and representatives of relevant national and local-level institutions. Likewise, the Commission formed a body of high-level advisors to ensure that the Chairperson's work was well-informed and credible. The advisors to the committee had highly visible professional and social reputations in Nepal and had much experience in the field of language conservation, promotion, research, and development. Another strategy we adopted was to establish close institutional linkages with federal, provincial, and local-level governments for collecting opinions and disseminating information across the country. In the beginning, only the Chairperson was appointed. Despite provisions for appointing members from all the provinces, it was a one-man Commission for almost two years. While this was a huge responsibility, I took it as an opportunity to prove my strength. I had to utilize all possible sources of knowledge, including the formation of the advisory body and rapport building with Ministers and Government officials. More importantly, the collaboration I had with language communities across the country was truly remarkable. I learned so much from them and set an agenda for the Commission based on the input we received from community members. I took up the challenge in the hope that I was not alone. In essence, whatever I could do at this early stage of

my appointment as Chairperson might yield far-reaching results and provide a firm foundation for the years to come. Another member, Ms. Usha Hamal, a highly reputed author and an experienced professional, was appointed to the Commission in the second year of my tenure, and for more than five years, we two were the only appointed officials. In the sixth year, all members were finally appointed as had been envisioned in the Constitution. During my tenure, we had great difficulty carrying out the tasks stipulated in the Constitution as well as in the Language Commission Act. The expectations of stakeholders were so high, and we had to show quick results. The staff members and I faced considerable pressure due to the heavy workload, high expectations, and the urgency of the task at hand. We were fortunate to receive excellent support and cooperation from the stakeholders, enriching our journey and helping us to demonstrate results as envisioned in the Constitution.

5. What critical issues did you have to consider while discharging your duty?

When Nepal's new Constitution was drafted, a number of concerns raised by language stakeholders and members of the Constituent Assembly could not be adequately addressed. The major concerns were related to the conservation of languages, the recognition of official languages at the provincial level, and the use of mother tongues at federal, provincial, and local levels (Republica 2024). These unresolved issues and matters pertaining to the federalization of Nepal's languages were passed on to the Language Commission to address and resolve.

Regarding the recommendations for official languages, a five-year timeline had been set by the Constitution. As per the statutory provision, this matter had to be resolved within this time frame. The issue was linked with a decision to be made by each province for official recognition of specific language(s)

(Sijapati 2021), alongside Nepali, which was and is the official language of Nepal. This proved to be a highly contentious issue. With great effort, we succeeded in having all provinces agree to recognize their official languages as per the recommendations of the Commission. The role played by Commission staff members was critical for the gains we were able to make within a relatively short period of time.

One of the challenges I faced at that time was the absence of legal instruments to support the work in which we were engaged. We needed Cabinet approval for the Language Commission's Executive Order, and this was essential to make the Commission functional. At the same time, the Parliament needed to pass the Language Commission Act as soon as possible to recognize the Commission as a competent and important entity. With considerable effort and advocacy, we finally succeeded in obtaining approval for these two basic documents to make the Commission institutionally functional. I deeply appreciate the support we received from the then Rt Hon'ble Speaker of the House of Representatives, Ms. Onsari Gharti Magar, and the Hon Minister for Culture, Mr. Jeetendra Dev. A dedicated session was held in Parliament, which is rare in Nepal, to debate the Language Commission Bill. The Bill formally received approvals from the Parliament in October 2017. Simultaneously, we had to work on developing a five-year Master Plan focusing on our constitutional mandate as well as articulating the terms of reference stipulated in the Act of Parliament. We then worked on annual action plans and prepared programs and budgets based on the resources allocated by the Government.

Recognizing the need for advisory input to the Language Commission for its engagement at federal, provincial, and local levels, a high-level Advisory Committee was formed, comprising Mr. Bairagi Kaila, Professor Chuda Mani Bandhu, Professor Yogendra

Prasad Yadava, Professor Tej Ratna Kansakar, Professor Madhav Pokharel, Professor Nobel Kishore Rai, Dr. Rudra Laxmi Shrestha, Professor Dan Raj Regmi, Professor Dubi Nanda Dhakal, and Professor Balram Prasai. All were renowned language advocates, linguists, language scientists, and scholars in Nepal. The formation of the Advisory Committee contributed significantly to first creating and then enabling an environment for the Commission to engage in a meaningful consultative process across the country.

Our first objectives included carrying out the four major mandates as articulated in the Constitution and outlined at the top of this contribution. The objectives were aligned with the milestones set in the Master Plan, and action steps were developed following our annual work plans and budget allocations. Elaborations were made on action steps for how official languages could be identified and recognized, how mediums of instruction for children could be reinforced at the local level, how language protection could be a priority, and how research could be carried out in collaboration with universities and relevant institutions as well as departments. Our plan also included developing monitoring tools and indicators alongside reporting mechanisms and feedback procedures.

6. What were your greatest achievements during your term?

After almost two years of solitary work as the Language Commission's only member, a new member was finally appointed. Staff members who were on the team from the beginning deserve particular credit for setting an agenda for conversations about language in the country. It was a real point of departure for the Commission to see language issues being debated so extensively with such a high level of enthusiasm across Nepal. Our team worked extremely hard to reach out to language communities and stakeholders in almost all parts of the country. Our advisory team and staff

members were deeply dedicated and committed to carrying out consultations about the role and status of official languages, the use of mother tongues, and language conservation. Seven teams were formed to work at the provincial levels, drawing on speakers of local languages, language researchers, and key experts. Likewise, provincial-level conveners and team members worked day and night to produce reports on the language makeup and requirements of individual provinces. The consultative meetings we organized at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, as well as at community levels with local stakeholders, municipality officials, political leaders, experts, and language activists, together with our distinguished advisors, proved to be truly rewarding and necessary for making recommendations on all areas of language work and policy as envisioned by the Constitution.

The provincial-level conveners who took the lead in organizing consultations and preparing reports on the official language(s) of Nepal's provinces included (1) Mr. Bairagi Kainla (Til Bikram Nemwang)—Koshi Province; (2) Professor Yogendra Prasad Yadava—Madhesh Province; (3) Professor Tej Ratna Kansakar—Bagmati Province; (4) Dr. Jagman Gurung—Gandaki Province; (5) Professor Hridaya Ratna Bajracharya—Lumbini Province; (6) Professor Jeevendra Dev Giri—Karnali Province; and (7) Professor Amma Raj Joshi—Far Western Province. In addition, the provincial task team members were senior-level professionals, linguists, language scientists, and researchers with strong reputations. I acknowledge with gratitude the support we received from the province-level conveners and members in accomplishing this task.

One of the greatest achievements of the Language Commission was that we succeeded in setting a language agenda at federal, provincial, and local levels. Nepal's language communities and other stakeholders expressed the view that this was the first time they

felt their languages were being recognized and that their voices had been heard by the state. This was one of the most important successes for us. People participated in the debates and discussed issues relating to language, something that in all likelihood had never ever happened before in their lifetime, at least not in ways that were supported by the state. We encouraged people to speak in their own language(s) and provided translators during plenary sessions and group discussions.

A major achievement of the Commission was developing criteria for the status planning of languages at federal, provincial, and local levels and recommending eleven province-level official languages, in addition to the Nepali language.

In the federal context of Nepal, these recommendations signify a clear departure towards a federal language policy, with a focus on decentering language policy across the country (Tupas 2019). The languages recommended for official use (Pradhan, 2021) in Nepal's 7 provinces include (1) Avadhi (Lumbini province), (2) Bajjika (Madhesh province), (3) Bhojपुरी (Madhesh and Gandaki provinces), (4) Dotyali (Far Western province), (5) Gurung (Gandaki province), (6) Limbu (Koshi province), (7) Magar (Gandaki and Karnali provinces), (8) Maithili (Koshi and Madhesh provinces), (9) Nepal Bhasa (Bagmati province), (10) Tamang (Bagmati province), and (11) Tharu (Lumbini and Far Western provinces).

Similarly, a notable achievement for us was the recognition of Indigenous languages spoken by smaller communities, all of whom faced ongoing marginalization and high levels of endangerment. The Commission identified 9 new languages (National Statistics Office 2021: 32) that had not been reported in the 2011 census, including Nawa Sherpa (Shankhuwa Sabha), Marek-Yakkha (Dhankuta and Ilam), Serake (Mustang), Poike (Dolpa), Nubri (Gorkha), Chum (Gorkha), Nar Phu (Manang), and Rana Tharu (Kanchanpur and Kailali). Furthermore, the Language

Commission provided a framework for recognizing official languages within a municipality.

All languages spoken in Nepal were given a functional space to survive and thrive at the community, ward, municipal, provincial, and federal levels. The languages of historical importance, as well as classical languages, namely the Bhot language, Pali language, and Sanskrit language (Regmi 2021), were given recognition to support their protection, growth, and development. Recommendations were made for the conservation, promotion, and development of the marginalized languages of Nepal that were threatened by majority languages and for those languages that hold particular power at local and global levels. Recommendations were also made for how best to safeguard Nepal's languages from the ever-growing spread of English and other powerful, globalizing languages (Siwal 2021). In order to protect highly endangered languages facing real threat, the Commission took an initiative to digitize language corpora and provide such languages with a digital platform for inter-language connectivity and translation (Michailovsky 2006). The Language Commission plans to launch the portal within the 2024 fiscal year.

Another important aspect of the Commission's work was to emphasize mother tongue medium education and instruction in schools across the nation. Recognizing the role of language in children's cognitive and academic development, the Commission suggested strategies for linking schools with ward-level language clusters for use in the classroom. The importance of nurturing and respecting a child's first language was reiterated in the Commission's recommendations for children's learning and all-round development. A foundation was laid for language research during my time at the Language Commission, in collaboration with university departments and other professionals. During my tenure, we stressed the need for publishing and

disseminating research findings and language data, created and revised based on a database provided by the National Statistics Office, Nepal. District, municipality, and ward-level databases were developed for both macro- and micro-level language projection and planning. Our collaboration with UNESCO (UNESCO 2021) and other relevant partners gave impressive results. By the end of my term, a remarkable change could be observed in terms of building trust within and across Nepal's diverse language communities. A network of language groups and stakeholders across the country proved to be a powerful way of bringing all language communities under one roof for a collective review of and response to the process of federalizing language policy. The many language stakeholders across Nepal appreciated the opportunity to work within a coordinated framework and—feeling empowered by this—seemed genuinely enthusiastic about the initiatives taken by the Commission.

7. What were the most significant challenges for you as Chairperson?

One of the major challenges for me was to win people's trust in advocating for the mission of the Language Commission. I faced considerable resistance as I sought to emphasize the use of native languages in families and communities. While the Commission advocated for multilingualism and promoted linguistic diversity, the prevailing policy circles and central-level institutions had been deeply influenced by a one-language discourse and ideology (Yadav, 2013), that of Nepali only (Turin, 2006). The spread of English also poses a huge threat to Nepal's languages. However, people in power do not seem to see this as a problem. They tend to abandon their own languages in favor of English (Xue and Zuo 2013).

My work was very challenging because of how I needed to work with others who often held quite divergent positions. I could initiate something in my

own capacity but could not advance anything at the structural or policy levels on my own. I had to coordinate and collaborate with stakeholders and partner agencies at federal, provincial, and local levels, many of whom held very different positions and ideologies about language. Until the establishment of the Commission, language had not been a government priority, nor had it received much attention from state institutions. Most intellectuals and politicians still believed that the Commission was ultimately irrelevant. Misconceptions were everywhere and remained rather entrenched. The way that Nepal's municipalities are increasingly introducing English as a medium of instruction at the earliest stage of a child's school-based education has proven to be detrimental to their cognitive development and academic success (Ghimire 2024). Unfortunately, I could not do much about this and was unable to convince authorities in the center as well as at the local level to think otherwise. Most of Nepal's elites have been heavily influenced by the spread of English and remain unaware of its effects on their home languages as well as on the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages in the country. I wish that we could have produced more compelling evidence to show the consequences of making poor policy choices for our children's education. I now feel that I could have done better to offer concrete examples in favor of using the mother tongue as a medium of children's education at the earliest stages of a child's education (Stoop 2017; Wilson and Kamanā 2006). Demystification calls for a collective response. To make change happen across a whole complex and federalizing country was daunting work and sometimes felt like a race against time. While to some extent, we have succeeded in bringing the agenda of the Language Commission to the consciousness of Nepal's citizens, we could have worked even more closely with language communities and municipalities to

cultivate a culture supportive of diverse language ecologies and bring about changes in stakeholders' attitudes and behaviors.

8. **What do you see the Language Commission achieving in the next 5-10 years?**

Within a five-to-ten-year time span, the Language Commission will have to ensure that all of its major recommendations are implemented at federal, provincial, and local levels. In ten years' time, all seven of Nepal's provinces will have their official languages in place. These languages will also be recognized as languages of federal business, alongside Nepali. I anticipate that all official languages in the federal and provincial systems will have a national portal for inter-language corpora using machine translation to fulfill their federal, provincial, and local level-language functions, and that all languages spoken in Nepal will be represented through a digital database in the national archive. By the end of the next decade, each municipality in the country will have recognized one or two official languages at the local level, based on speech populations. Other local languages will have received community-level legal recognition and official status to fulfill their functional roles. Languages that are highly endangered or at risk (Pine and Turin 2017) will be entitled to receive state grants for conducting language sessions to encourage families and young learners to speak the language. Incentive schemes that promote language within the family and at home will be introduced in municipalities (Sun 2019). Intergenerational transmission of languages will have received welcome and timely attention across Nepal.

It is my hope that all schools—public and private—will have introduced mother tongue medium instruction policies at the earliest stage of school education, at least up to class five. Nepali, English and other national as well as classical and foreign languages

will be taught as subjects. The existing policy of English medium education at the early stage of education will be abolished. The Government of Nepal will be held accountable if the number of speakers of any language decreases or if local communities face language loss and greater endangerment.

I also imagine that language policies and Acts of Parliament will be in place at federal, provincial, and local levels. A digital database will be created in collaboration with the Government of Nepal and the Office of the Statistics, which will provide a basis for monitoring the status of Nepal's languages over time.

Under the aegis of the Language Commission, a Centre for Language Research and Innovation will be created with world-class facilities for language documentation and archiving in collaboration with Tribhuvan University's Central Department of Linguistics and other institutions. Harnessing the vastness of Nepal's linguistic diversity, the Language Commission will morph into a center of excellence for national and international communities to engage in collaborative language research, share experiences, and document best practices at all levels in service of both global linguistic diversity and Nepal's many Indigenous languages.

Lava Deo Awasthi has served as Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Education, Government of Nepal, and as the first Chairman, Language Commission of Nepal. Born in Baitadi district in the Far Western Province of Nepal, Awasthi earned MAs in English Literature from Tribhuvan University and in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from Leicester University, England, UK. He received his Ph.D. degree from the Danish University of Education, Copenhagen.

Mark Turin is an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia. Turin previously served as the Director of the Yale Himalaya Initiative and Chief of Translation and Interpretation at the United Nations Mission in Nepal. In 2000, he co-founded the Digital Himalaya Project, a platform to make multimedia resources from the Himalayan region widely available online. From 2013-2020, together with Sienna Craig, he edited the journal *HIMALAYA*.

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