

## Country Profile

# NEPAL

## In the Abode of Snow

**A**mong the snow-blanketed mountains of the Himalayas lies a landlocked country called Nepal. *Himalaya* comes from two words in Sanskrit: *hima* means “snow” and *alaya* means “abode.” So, it should not be surprising to realize that these mountains are snow-covered throughout the whole year. Nepal has eight of the world’s ten highest peaks. A network of streams and rivers crisscross the country, draining the melting snow from these mountains and the heavy rains from the hills. Monsoon rains fall on the middle and lower elevations from June to September.

Fifty percent of Nepal is an area called the Mahabharat Range, or the Middle Hills. Calling them “hills” is a bit deceiving, for anywhere else in the world they would surely be called mountains. About half of Nepal’s more than 20 million people live here.

Seen from the air, it is a series of endless steep ridges on which terraces have been built wherever possible. The rough terrain makes it impossible to build roads, so Nepalese almost always travel by foot. Many will walk barefoot even through the snow of the mountains. Miles do not measure distances, but how many hours it takes to walk. All supplies must be carried on the backs of men, women, and children.



## Nepal

### Area

About the size of Arkansas

### Population

24,000,000

### People Groups

Indo Aryan 79%  
 Tibeto-Burman 17%  
 Munda-Santal .3%  
 Other 3.7%

### Official Languages

Nepali  
 All Languages – 124

### Literacy

40%

### Scripture Translations

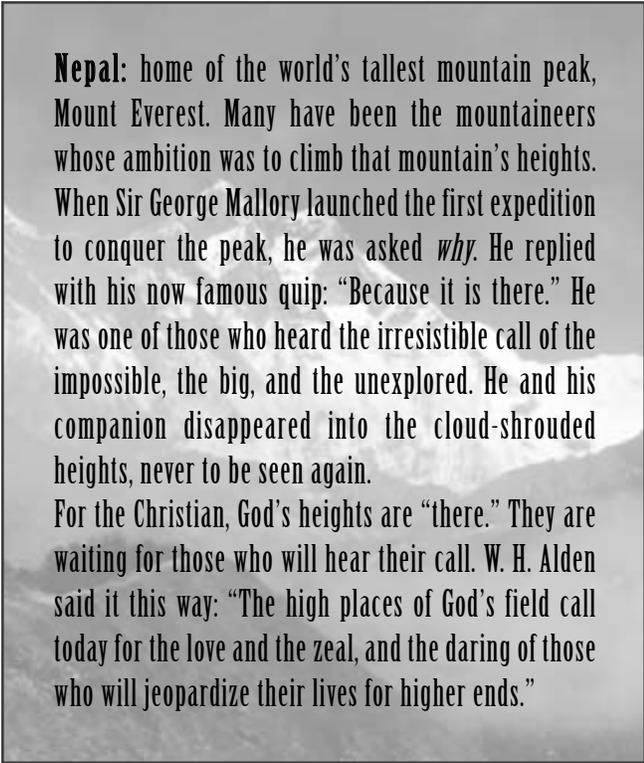
6 Bibles  
 11 New Testaments  
 9 portions  
 12 works in process

### Religions

Hindu 75%  
 Buddhist 16%  
 Muslim 5%  
 Christian 2%  
 Other 2%

## Its People

There are dozens of distinct people groups living in Nepal. Though they have lived together for hundreds of years, there has been little blending and mixing. You and your neighbor might speak different languages and worship different gods, and no one would even think it strange or different. Actually the Nepalese seem to



**Nepal:** home of the world's tallest mountain peak, Mount Everest. Many have been the mountaineers whose ambition was to climb that mountain's heights. When Sir George Mallory launched the first expedition to conquer the peak, he was asked *why*. He replied with his now famous quip: "Because it is there." He was one of those who heard the irresistible call of the impossible, the big, and the unexplored. He and his companion disappeared into the cloud-shrouded heights, never to be seen again. For the Christian, God's heights are "there." They are waiting for those who will hear their call. W. H. Alden said it this way: "The high places of God's field call today for the love and the zeal, and the daring of those who will jeopardize their lives for higher ends."

enjoy the differences of culture and customs, and like to discuss them.

Though the Nepalese government has outlawed the caste system, it still strongly impacts everyday life. Even names are not just simply names, but indicate which caste one belongs to, and perhaps even where one is from. Those from the lowest caste, the working class, have to endure endless discrimination and are usually not allowed inside the homes of other castes. The tribal hill peoples are outside the caste system, but have their own class system through clans and family groups.

Nepal's hill tribes crossed over the mountain passes to the north or followed mountain trails from Burma to the east. They have more oriental features and speak their own individual languages. Probably the most famous tribal people of Nepal are the Sherpas, whose origin is Tibetan. They have a long history of being the traders from Tibet to India. They made their way through the mountains, loaded down with backpacks and leading trains of pack animals. The Himalayas could not stop them; the mountains were simply an obstacle to be dealt with and overcome. The Sherpas were so strong, hardy, and agile that they earned the nickname "Tigers of the Snow." They are valued as moun-

taineers, porters, and guides. Today many live as farmers and yak herders. They may be away from home as much as six months at a time, returning in time for the monsoon season.

The Rais and Limbus live throughout the eastern hills of Nepal. The men carry the traditional Nepali knife with a long, curved blade. They tuck it into a long cloth wrapped around their waist. They are famous for their beautiful stone masonry.

The Tharus might be called the "jungle people." They have a natural immunity to malaria that has allowed them to survive for centuries. Probably partly due to their shyness and inexperience with money, they are one of the poorest, most exploited peoples of Nepal. Ruthless moneylenders have often seized their best land in payment for debts.

Another group is the Bhotos. *Bho* is another name for Tibet. These people live in the high valleys, surrounded by mountains. They are strong Buddhists. They live in almost total isolation, each group only about as big as the small valley where its people live. The Bhotos are farmers, sheep and yak herders, and traders.

## Daily Life

A typical day in a mountain village begins even before the roosters crow. There is wood to be gathered, water to be fetched, and fodder to be cut for the animals. Water may come from a nearby well, or it may be an hour's walk away at a mountain stream. As the forests disappear, the people must go farther than ever for fuel and water. The fire is lit and cooking begins as the household stirs. There may be tea with sugar, and there will probably be a thick porridge of millet, corn, and wheat. There might be a curry, a broth, or vegetables with it.

For children who are fortunate enough to go to school, school starts at 10 a.m. The others are off to the fields and work. Whether it is farm work or grazing cattle, laundry or getting wood and water, everything is done by hand and carried back.

The sun is the clock, so as it sets, everyone gathers around the fire. Small lanterns are lit, or just the dim glow of the fire sheds its light on the group of people gathered there. When din-



ner is over, the family will often gather round and talk until everyone goes to sleep.

Women do about 70% of the work, whether fetching water, wood or fodder, or weeding, hoeing or harvesting. A new bride earns respect in her husband's family by hard work. Though life isn't always rosy, divorce is rare.

When two Nepalese meet on the road, one of the first questions asked is usually, "*Bhaat khanu bhaeyo?*" This means, "Have you eaten rice?" That is because rice is very important in Nepal. When they talk of *rice*, sometimes they use the word meaning "food." Rice is a choice food and a symbol of status and wealth. Because it can only be grown in the lowlands, must have plenty of water, and be carried on someone's back to other places, it is expensive and many can only eat it on special occasions.

Food is only eaten with the right hand. It is very important to wash your hand before you eat, and very necessary afterwards. Food tastes better, they say, when you eat it with your fingers. Perhaps they are right? Water is drunk from a communal pitcher, but you must never touch your mouth to it, or it will be thrown out. You drink by pouring it into your open mouth and swallowing at the same time.

Tea is the national drink. The choices go far beyond sugar, milk, and lemon. Cinnamon, ginger, cloves, and cardamom are commonly

added. They like their tea sweet, spicy and milky. If there is no sugar they may add a pinch of salt. The tea is usually up to half milk. On cold days black pepper and raw ginger are added to warm you. It's hard to imagine anything better for a cold day!

## Its Worship

Nepal is a very religious country. Though officially a Hindu nation, probably around half of the population also practice Buddhism as well, or use the tribal shamans. From city to rural village, monasteries, *stupas*, and temples dot the way. Prayer flags and other symbols of devotion are everywhere. Every morning the streets of villages are full of people going to worship. The women carry trays with flowers, sweets, rice, colored powders, and a small bell. These will be offerings and parts of worship.

The Hindu belief that divinity is everywhere greatly impacts life. Roads are built around trees and large rocks, rather than removing them at risk of disturbing the god. Cows are sacred and never killed or eaten. They wander loose everywhere and with no need to fear, for to kill a cow (even by accident) can result in up to 20 years in jail.

Nepal has dozens of festivals. It has been said that there are as many festivals as days in a year. This is probably true if you include local festivals. Many are dedicated to a specific god or goddess. Some are between members of the family, and one is for women only. The biggest festival is in honor of the god of destruction.

They are devoted... but to what? They need to hear of the One who gives life, not death and destruction. They need to know about Jesus, the only true and living Way to the Father. How will they hear without a preacher? Pray that the Lord of Harvest would send forth laborers into this ripe harvest of souls.

