

Chepang is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by about 30,000 people living almost exclusively in the Makwanpur, Chitwan and the southern parts of the Gorkha and Dhading districts of south-western central Nepal. Geographically this area is part of the outer foothills of the Himalayas. It consists of the Mahabharat Range and its branching spurs, lying immediately north of the lowland Terai region. Most of the Chepang live at an altitude of between 800 and 1,500 metres in very rugged and partially forested hills, though in recent years some have migrated to lower areas.

3 Economy and culture

Over the past few generations the Chepang have changed from a semi-nomadic to a settled way of life, with the result that, for food supplies, they now rely more on the produce of permanent fields than on the forest. Some slash-and-burn agriculture is still practised however, and the forest is still an important supplementary source of food, especially wild yams, during the lean period before the new year's crops. The marked deforestation that has occurred in recent years with migration into the area has meant that this supplementary source is now rapidly dwindling.

The fact that, in many areas, the Chepang still live close to the jungle is supported by the way they are completely at home in the forest, even at night, also by their wide knowledge of jungle lore, their skill at hunting and gathering, and their rich vocabulary for plants and animals (see Appendix 2). Some of the vocabulary relating to hunting and gathering may well be unique to Chepang. For example, the verb *ceh-* means 'to bind sticks to a large tree in order to climb it'. Another verb *tyuyu?*- means 'to ascend or descend a tree by a branch (not by the main trunk)'. The verb *ghyup-* describes the curved trajectory of a thrown object and is used when aiming at an object far down a hillside—in contrast to *chyolo?*-, which is used for a direct throw. Another pair of words are *pan-* and *payh-*, which have the basic meaning of 'go out from' and 'return to', in relation to a base or campsite.

The Chepang way of life continues to show influences of its hunting and gathering origins. It is a very egalitarian society in that women have effective equality with men, and there is no social ranking or structure outside the family. There are no Chepang terms for 'chief' or 'leader', nor for 'village'. Preference is given to young and fit adults, and sometimes elderly persons were sent out from the main household to survive by themselves in the forest, or in remote fields. As mentioned before, the Chepang are completely at home in the forest, day or night, but feel out of place in towns and cities. Until very recently none lived in urban or semi-urban areas.

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A Tibeto-Burman language of Nepal

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