

# Jirel



## Population:

10,450 (2000)  
12,950 (2010)  
16,000 (2020)

**Countries:** Nepal

**Buddhism:** Tibetan

**Christians:** 200

## Overview of the Jirel

**Other Names:** Ziral, Jiri, Jirial, Jiripa

### Population Sources:

8,000 to 10,000 in Nepal (2000, B Grimes [1998 figure])

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetic, Tibetan, Southern

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 70%

**Practising Buddhists:** 20%

**Christians:** 1.9%

**Scripture:** New Testament 1992; Portions 1977

**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** Jirel

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** JUL

A 1998 researcher found that there were between 8,000 and 10,000 members of the Jirel tribe living in eastern Nepal.<sup>1</sup> The 1991 Nepal census, however, for some reason officially counted some Jirel villages under other tribes and returned a figure of just 4,889 Jirel people. They inhabit the Jiri and Sikri valleys in the Dolakha District of Janakpur Zone. The largest of their 22 villages are Jiri and Jugu. Dolakha is located about 50 kilometres (32 mi.) east of the nation's capital, Kathmandu.<sup>2</sup> Jirel villages are situated at altitudes between 1,700 and 2,000 metres (5,600 to 6,560 ft.) above sea level. A few Jirel are also found within the Okhaldhunga District of Sagarmatha Zone.

The history of the Jirel is interesting. Scholars record them as one of the ten clans of the Sunwar tribe, who today number more than 40,000 people south of the Jirel region. Unlike most of the other Sunwar groups, the Jirel did not convert to Hinduism but have clung to their belief in Buddhism as well as to their ancient

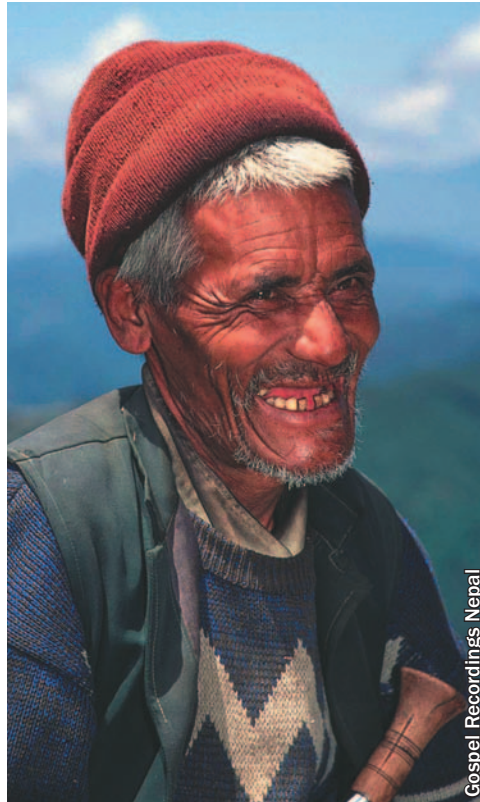
shamanistic rituals. 'The Jirel may therefore, like the Surel, another Sunwar clan, be the products of miscegenation of Sunwar and Sherpa.'<sup>3</sup> The Sunwar generally consider the Jirel to be inferior, and refuse to intermarry with them, 'neither do they eat food cooked by Jirels. In areas where Sunwars do not live in proximity to the Jirel villages, these Jirels call themselves Sunwars, and they also try to remain unconnected and aloof from the Sherpa community, pretending to be superiors.'<sup>4</sup>

The Jirel language is part of the Kanauri branch of Tibeto-Burman.<sup>5</sup> It shares 67 per cent lexical similarity with Sherpa, 65 per

cent with Helambu Sherpa and 54 per cent with Central Tibetan.<sup>6</sup> The Jirel have their own script, but only 25 per cent to 30 per cent of Jirel adults are literate, and 60 per cent of younger people.

Some sources state that the Jirel are a Hindu-Buddhist mix, but others firmly state that Tibetan Buddhism is their primary religion. Two Nepali scholars say, 'Jirels are Buddhists. They have their own lamas, gompas and religio-tribal rites and rituals.

Lamas and also *jhankris* act as priests in their rites, rituals and festivals.'<sup>7</sup> The animistic roots of the Jirel can also be witnessed in their ceremonies. When a person dies, 'a copper coin is placed in the corpse's right hand, a little mud from the *pindi* (verandah of the house) is placed in the left hand and a smoldering coal from the hearth is placed

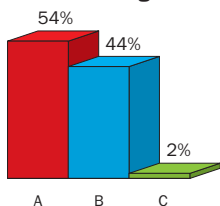


Gospel Recordings Nepal

on the corpse's mouth'.<sup>8</sup> These items are believed to help the ancestors recognize the deceased as one of their own, and to guide the dead person's spirit to the next world.

A small yet strong Christian community exists among the Jirel people. Missionaries have lovingly worked among them for many years. They translated the first Scripture portions into the Jirel language in 1977, and the entire New Testament was printed in 1992. The Old Testament is now being translated. The non-Christians persecuted the Jirel believers at first, but in more recent years there has been a growing acceptance of the Christian faith.

## Status of Evangelization



**A** = Have never heard the gospel  
**B** = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians  
**C** = Are adherents to some form of Christianity