

Muslim Mobilization and the State in Nepal, 1951-95

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The history of Muslim settlement in Nepal dates back to the early 16th century. However, the recognition of Muslims as a separate religious group and, consequently, of their cultural rights as equal citizens was not granted by the Nepalese state until 1962. From the available historical accounts it is evident that from 1768 until the middle of the 19th century Muslims, along with their Christian counterparts, were treated as virtual outcasts (both social and political) by the newly formed state of unified Nepal (Gaborieau 1995: 13-14).¹

During the entire Rana period, which began in 1846, Nepalese Muslims held an impure and inferior status in a rigidly hierarchical social structure, based on the Hindu fourfold national caste system (Höfer 1979: 40-1, Gaborieau 1972). The revolution of 1950, which brought an end to the autocratic Rana regime, fell short of permanently replacing the absolute rule of the monarchy with a parliamentary form of government. Muslims had shown their solidarity with the anti-Rana movement by associating themselves with the major political organizations, namely the Nepali Congress and the Communists (Ansari 1981: 37-8, Gautam 1989: 9). Their yearning for a democratic system was most evident when, immediately after the overthrow of the Ranas, Muslims tried to organize themselves on a common platform (the 'All Nepal Anjuman Islah') for the overall uplift of their community.²

In the following years, when Nepal, after a brief stint with democracy (1959-60), slipped back into absolute monarchical rule, the Muslim community found that the new system presented it with a dual social status. Constitutionally, Muslims gained the status of equal citizens (i.e. equal before the law); in practice, however, they continued to hold a low status in a tradition-bound society, and to be deprived of political and economic benefits (Gaborieau 1972). The Panchayat period thus reaffirmed the marginalized minority character of the community. Consequently, despite religious freedom during the 30 long years of Panchayat rule, the growth of a religious group consciousness among the Nepalese

¹ Marc Gaborieau has been studying the Muslim community in Nepal since the 1960s and has numerous works to his credit, most of them written in French.

² The All Nepal Anjuman Islah was established in 1953 for the social and economic uplift of the Muslim community. One Mr Ahmeddin, who later became a king's nominee in the legislative bodies as the representative of Muslims, was its president.

Muslims was more or less chequered. However, during the mid-1970s there began a slow and gradual process of organizing the otherwise passive community by placing an emphasis on their Islamic identity. This politicization of Muslim ethnic identity in post-1950 Nepal will now be examined in detail.

The process of change and Muslim group mobilization

In order to understand conflicts between old and new values it is helpful to relate a country's political culture to the nature of its state structure and its overall level of development. In Nepal, while on the one hand we see that the Panchayat system was drawn from the indigenous Nepali political tradition that had been predominantly feudalistic, on the other we find that during the post-1950 democratic era attempts had been made to inject a new political culture among the people by innovating popular institutions and values (Baral 1989: 317). This conflict of old and new values was also reflected in the pattern of ethnic and minority group mobilizations. The abandonment of parliamentary democracy resulted in a revival of authoritarian trends and institutions, and stalled the process of affirming group identities. Yet at the same time the period of wider political participation (1958-60) and the reintroduction of universal adult suffrage in the 1980s also saw the leadership of underprivileged groups demanding a greater share in societal rewards and goods by means of "affirmative action" (Poudyal 1992: 136-7, Phadnis 1989: 124-5).

This kind of group behaviour was also discernible in the case of the Muslim minorities, though it must be remembered that any mobilization of religious minority groups such as the Muslims would always be restrained in an overarching Hindu state system, irrespective of its experiments with democratic norms and values. Changes in Muslim group behaviour since the end of the Rana autocracy can be categorized as 'identity assertion' and 'identity assimilation': the first took place while the political environment was being liberalized, and the second during the period of the closed Panchayat system.

During the 1950s, against the backdrop of a promise to establish a people's government after the fall of the Ranas, Muslims, along with other peoples from oppressed caste and ethnic groups, engaged themselves in the upliftment of their community. Various Muslim social and religious associations were formed in Kathmandu and the Tarai districts. Prominent among these were the All Nepal Anjuman Islah (in Kathmandu), the Jamitul Muslim (in Rautahat), and the Idare Tamire Millat (in Banke). However, by 1958 all of these organizations had merged into the All Nepal Anjuman Islah. The closeness of its founder, Mr Ahmeddin, to the king and the palace ensured that this organization survived as the sole representative body of the Muslims (ANAI 1980: 2-4). The organization basically represented the Muslims' cause and on many occasions it played an active role in settling disputes with the majority community over issues such as the construction of mosques or the demarcation of lands for graveyards, by taking these up with the local authorities and urging them to be sympathetic to the problems of the minorities. In addition, taking advantage of the liberal political atmosphere of 1958 when Nepal's first democratic constitution was being framed, the Anjuman Islah even tendered a petition to the Department of

Education asking for the inclusion of elementary Urdu and elementary Persian instead of elementary Sanskrit at the SLC level examination for the entire Muslim community in Nepal (Ansari n.d.: 30-2).

Once Panchayat rule had been established, organizations such as the Anjuman Islah restricted themselves to the role of a Muslim religious body, occasionally raising issues that jeopardized the Muslim religious freedom enshrined in the 1962 constitution.³ Thus the years of Panchayat rule saw the Muslim leadership acting passively: by the 1970s the Anjuman Islah with its royal patronage remained the sole representative body of the Nepalese Muslims. In return for assurances of royal protection against any majority wrath and the occasional nomination of its president to the Rastriya Panchayat (the President of the Anjuman Islah, Mr Ahmeddin, was twice nominated by King Mahendra to the highest legislative body in 1960 and 1963; ANAI 1980: 5), the monarchy ensured that Muslims under the banner of 'Anjuman' remained staunch votaries of the partyless Panchayat system. However, during the late 1970s and 1980s, with the introduction of gradual reforms within the partyless system, a subtle yearning for a separate Muslim identity emerged among a section of the Muslims. Under the banners of the Millat-E-Islamia and the Muslim Sevā Samiti, this section of the community slowly began to emphasize its separate Islamic identity in opposition to the state's drive for Nepalization and Hinduization. Despite these new aspirations, Muslims did not feel secure enough to side with the supporters of a multi-party system in the 1980 referendum, and felt that remaining loyal to the monarch would provide them with the best legal protection, because the strict enforcement of law and order under royal rule was one of the best features of Panchayat system (Ansari n.d.: 33-4). They nevertheless took advantage of the atmosphere of dissent when reforms to the system ushered in an era of political modernization. Besides, this slow change in Muslim group behaviour also reflected the Panchayat government's efforts to establish better ties with the Arab world. In 1981, during an official visit of the Saudi foreign minister to Nepal, the official daily, the *Gorkhāpatra*, reported that there were 1.4 million Muslims residing in Nepal (a figure far in excess of the figures shown in the official census). Further, the government's decision to nominate a Muslim, Mohd. Mohsin, as Nepal's ambassador to Saudi Arabia, gave the Nepalese Muslims an opportunity to feel positive for the first time about their strength in the country.

In 1981 the first ever Rastriya Panchayat elections held through adult franchise saw Muslim candidates contesting from as many as 14 districts (12 from the Tarai region and 2 from the hills). Though only two Muslim members were elected to the national legislature (Ismail Ansari from Mahottari and Sheikh Siraju from Rautahat), Harka Gurung observed that Muslim representation in the 1981 national legislature increased by 1.4% over previous Panchayats, which had been elected indirectly (Gurung 1989: 130-2; see also Shaha 1992: 109).

³ Article 14 of the 1962 Constitution stated that "every person may profess his own religion as handed down from ancient times and may practise it having regard to tradition."

Identity assertion in post-1990 democratic Nepal

The restoration of multi-party democracy marked the culmination of a people's movement against the absolutism of the monarch which had continued for 30 years through his partyless Panchayat rule. In fact the slow but steady process of political modernization that was initiated in the 1980s by the Panchayat rulers through their electoral reforms was also coupled with the modernization of communication media and transportation, thereby facilitating the spread of education and an increased awareness of international democratic developments among the Nepalese masses. A corresponding rise in demands for greater political participation and more equitable representation of the various group identities ensured the successful replacement of authoritarianism with a constitutional democracy.

With the defeat of the forces that favoured a monolithic state system, the superficiality of the homogeneous 'Nepalized' character of the state was soon exposed as demands were made by numerous ethnic groups to give due recognition to the pluralist reality of Nepalese society. For their part too, Muslims had contributed to this political development, first by joining hands with the pro-democracy forces⁴ and then, inspired by the constitutional provisions and encouraged by Islamic countries in West Asia, by starting to raise their ethnic and religious profile. The formation of a number of Muslim welfare organizations was the first step towards asserting a distinctive Muslim religious identity in an otherwise overwhelmingly Hindu cultural setup. One of the main objectives of these bodies was to establish themselves as Muslim interest groups in democratic Nepal.

The active involvement of the Muslim community in the participatory political process became evident during the first general elections held in post-1990 Nepal, when 31 Muslim candidates contested from the Tarai region. The fact that five of them were elected, representing major national parties like the Nepali Congress, the Nepal Communist Party (UML), and the Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP),⁵ and were even assigned important positions such as Cabinet Minister (Sheikh Idris) and Interim Speaker of the Lower House (Khalil Miya Ansari) after the Nepali Congress ministry was sworn in, indicated the Muslim community's involvement in a participatory political process that had only recently been introduced (see Table 1).

⁴ Muslim leaders from the Muslim-dominated districts of Banke (Muhammad Siddiqui and Meraj Ahmed), Rautahat (Sheikh Idris), and Bara (Salim Ansari) participated in the pro-democracy movement in 1989-90.

⁵ In the 1991 elections, the Muslim MPs who were elected to the Lower House of Parliament were Khalil Miya Ansari (NC), Sheikh Idris (NC), Salim Ansari (CPN UML), Mirza Dilshad Beg (NSP), and Sayed Meraj (NC).

Table 1. Ethnic/Caste Representation in the Legislature (by percentage)

Ethnic group	1959	1978	1981*	1991		
				Lower House	Upper House	Both Houses
A. Hill Group	78.0	85.1	79.4	79.0	84.9	80.3
1. Bahun	27.5	21.3	12.5	36.6	40.0	37.4
2. Chetri	31.2	36.2	36.6	18.5	15.0	17.7
3. Newar	3.7	7.9	8.0	6.8	13.3	8.3
4. Tribal	15.6	18.9	22.3	16.6	13.3	15.8
5. Occupational	-	0.8	-	0.5	3.3	1.1
B. Tarai Group	22.0	15.0	20.5	21.0	15.0	19.6
6. Brahman	3.7	2.3	-	2.4	1.6	2.3
7. Landed caste	10.1	7.0	7.1	5.4	5.0	5.3
8. Trader caste	2.8	1.6	1.8	2.0	3.3	2.3
9. Tribal	3.7	3.2	9.8	8.8	3.3	7.5
10. Muslim	1.8	0.8	1.8	2.4	1.7	2.3
All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of seats	109	127	112	205	60	265

* Excludes nominated members

Adapted from Gurung (1992: 20). The table contains minor arithmetic inconsistencies.

The raised profile of the Muslim religious minority is also discernible in the slow but remarkable change in its group behaviour. The incidence of Hindu-Muslim tension in Tulsipur (Dang district) and its fallout on the Muslims of Banke, and later in 1994 and 1995 the Hindu-Muslim conflicts in Nepalganj (Banke), testify to a mobilization of Muslims along ethno-religious lines and the growing intolerance towards such minority assertions on the part of the majority. Since 1995, annual All Nepal Muslim Conferences have been held under the banner of the All Nepal Etehad Sangh, which bring together Muslim representatives from all the Muslim-populated districts, and pass resolutions on behalf of the entire Nepali Muslim community. Furthermore, the hill Muslims' use of this platform to lodge their strongest protest against being referred to as *churaute* (a derogatory term for hill Muslims who follow the century-old profession of bangle-selling), and not simply as 'Muslims' like their Tarai counterparts, only reiterates the foregoing observations on their new role. But, as we see in the next section, raising its own profile as a distinct religious and political group does not free the Muslim community from cautious state responses, especially from a declared Hindu state and its institutions.

The state response

In its early stages, the political modernization process in Nepal has already provided space for the leaders of various ethnic and religious groups to mobilize their deprived communities through the effective use of symbols of identity. However, the state is still slow to initiate actual reforms to fight the social backwardness and economic impoverishment born of the centuries-old traditional feudal state system. To begin with, the state responded cautiously by not yielding to the demands of the non-Hindu religious groups, and by maintaining its religious character even in the democratic constitution of 1990 (Article 4(1) of the 1990 Constitution). Rishikesh Shaha, President of Nepal's Human Rights Organization of Nepal, points out in this regard that since the position of the Hindu king is safeguarded in Article 27(1), there was no reason for the Constitution to call Nepal a Hindu state in Article 4(1).⁶ This provision has therefore not only disappointed Nepal's vast indigenous (*janajāti*) population along with the Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian minorities, but also contradicts other constitutional provisions, such as Article 2, which states that the nation is constituted by the Nepali people irrespective of religion, and also Article 11(2), which ensures that the state should not discriminate against any of its citizens on the basis of religion, race, sex, caste, tribe, or ideology.⁷

⁶ Rishikesh Shaha also points out that the English version of the original Nepali text of Article 4(1) does not reflect the actual meaning. In Nepali, Article 4(1) states: "Nepal is a... Hindu, constitutional monarchical kingdom". Shaha maintains that the comma after 'Hindu' is significant. The 'unofficial' English version of Article 4(1) states: "Nepal is a multiethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, sovereign, Hindu monarchical kingdom" (Shaha 1992: 241-2).

⁷ The debate on retaining the Hindu character of the Nepali state became an impassioned argument between proponents of a secular state and proponents of a Hindu state during the drafting of the 1990 Constitution. Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian associations, along with several Mongoloid Janajāti groups, took out a massive demonstration to demand a secular state on June 30, 1990 (Fisher 1993, Hoftun and Raepel 1992: 156-9).

The Hindu character of the constitution has added to the dilemma of Nepalese Muslims too. While the participatory political culture induces them to abandon their compliant political behaviour, the continuance of the Hindu character of the state allows the state to exercise, along with political power, the priestly authority of the dominant religion too. In this regard it is significant that a section of Nepalese Muslims still believe that they should continue to play an acquiescent role in society, because during the Panchayat days this assured them of state protection against majoritarian violence. They also argue that the feeling of security they enjoyed during monarchical rule is preferable to their present status in the democratic system, which, although it allows them to assert their rights, does not give them the assurance that any communal violence will be quelled with the same alacrity and efficiency as it was under authoritarian rule.⁸

In fact, the sudden rise in the number of cases of communal tension after the establishment of multi-party democracy strengthens the common belief among Tarai Muslims that the Nepali state will not be favourably disposed towards Muslims once they start to demand equal opportunities as equal citizens in a democratic society. A chronological study of cases of communal conflict, and the state's response to them, may be useful in analysing a shift in the approach of the Nepali state to such incidents.

Incidents of major Hindu-Muslim conflict and the role of the Nepali state

1958-9 The first recorded major communal clash took place in 1958-59 in Bhawarpur village in the central Tarai district of Mahottari, when the majority community desecrated a mosque and also indulged in arson and looting against the Muslims.⁹ The then District Commissioner of Mahottari, Bikram Thapa, cooperated with the President of the Anjuman Islah, Mr Ahmeddin, in defusing the crisis. Later, the Muslims were even paid compensation of Rs 30,000 for the renovation of the mosque. The riot occurred during the transitional period of Nepali politics, when preparations for the first general elections were being made under a caretaker government, and this could possibly be the reason for a deterioration of prevailing Hindu-Muslim tension into acts of vandalism. Earlier, when the monarch was in full control, similar situations were quickly dealt with. For instance, in 1955 simmering tensions between Hindus and Muslims over a Tazia procession were defused by the personal intervention of King Mahendra, who sent a Muslim emissary from Kathmandu to solve the problem before it was aggravated further (ANAI 1980: 3, Ansari 1981: 26-7).

1959-60 During 1959-60, when the Nepali Congress Government was in power, another incident of communal violence took place in Adhyanpur village in Mahottari district. Riots

⁸ These views were expressed by many Muslim villagers in the central Tarai districts of Bara and Parsa during their interaction with the author. Most cited the 1971 Rautahat riot, in which King Mahendra's personal intervention helped to effect a speedy implementation of justice.

⁹ The Bulletin of the only prominent Nepalese Muslim organization, the All Nepal Anjuman Islah, which functioned during the period 1955-79, lists cases of Hindu-Muslim clashes and records the organization's role in defusing those crises as a representative body of the Muslims (ANAI 1980: 3).

broke out while a Hindu religious procession was making the rounds of the village. Two people were burned to death and more than 100 houses were set on fire. Though the situation was brought under control by giving adequate compensation to the bereaved side (ANAI 1980: 3), the loss of lives and property could have been avoided if the state administration had acted in time.

1971 The *gāī kāṇḍa* ('cow incident') riot in the central Tarai districts of Rautahat and Bara in 1971 was the first major case of Hindu-Muslim rioting after the return of the direct rule of the monarchy in 1960. This is the bloodiest Hindu-Muslim riot in the history of Nepal to date. The riot was sparked off by a rumour about a cow being killed in Bhusaha in Rautahat.¹⁰ To assess the actual loss of lives and property, a one-man investigation commission was set up by His Majesty's Government, and this reported the loss of 51 lives (27 in Rautahat and 24 in Bara) and the destruction of property worth 6.4 million rupees. It was pointed out that a misinformation campaign, which alleged that His Majesty's Government had sanctioned the looting and violence, further encouraged the looters. The sheer magnitude of the riot indicates that there was a complete breakdown of the ability of the local and zonal Panchayat administration to control the violence.¹¹ However, a personal visit by King Mahendra to the affected areas (even though it took place a month and a half later), and his assurances to the bereaved families that justice would be speedily implemented and that under his rule no such incidents would be allowed to happen in future, left a deep impact on the minds of the Muslims.¹² It was this apprehensiveness about their physical safety that made a section of the Muslims strong supporters of the partyless Panchayat system, since they felt that only the direct rule of the King could provide them with immunity from majoritarian attacks in future.

1992 The next well-reported case of communal tension was one that took place in Tulsipur (Dang) in October 1992. There, a small fight over some Muslims' use of a microphone for their daily Namaz, in a mosque adjacent to some Hindu celebrations which also used a microphone to play some songs, led to the desecration of the mosque. However the incident took a serious turn when the Muslims of the adjacent Banke district took the issue up with the local administration¹³ and their MP and demanded immediate state action against those who had allegedly desecrated the Holy Koran. When they were not offered any official assurance of action against the culprits, the agitated Muslim delegation indulged in violence. This event underlined growing Muslim mobilization along ethno-religious lines for the first time since the ushering in of pluralistic politics in 1990, and also the apathy of the state administration in dealing with such emotive issues in a sensitive manner.¹⁴

¹⁰ *The Rising Nepal*, Kathmandu, October 11 1971.

¹¹ *The Rising Nepal*, Kathmandu, November 30 1971 and December 9 1971.

¹² *Ibid.* See also Ansari (1981: 28).

¹³ See *Nepal Press Report*, Kathmandu, October 29 and November 3 1992.

¹⁴ As narrated to the author by Muslim leaders in Nepalganj. A version of the 1992 incident was also related to the author by the former MP from Nepalganj, Sushil Koirala, on December 17 1996, in Kathmandu.

1994-95 Muslim group assertion has certainly become more visible in Nepalganj over the past few years, and it has also corresponded with a slackening of the state machinery which enforces strict measures in the event of simmering communal tension. Two incidents of communal conflict within a period of 10 months (in December 1994 and October 1995) serve to indicate that trend. In December 1994, a dispute over the construction of a Hindu temple next to a Muslim *musāfirkhānā* (lodge) resulted in a clash between members of fundamentalist Hindu and Muslim organizations.¹⁵ However, the swift action that was taken at the behest of the newly formed Nepal Communist Party (UML) government did not allow this very volatile issue to deteriorate into a major Hindu-Muslim clash. None the less, the October 1995 riots reaffirmed the polarization of Hindu and Muslim interests in this town, and this time the siding of major political party leaders (those of the Nepali Congress and the National Democratic Party) with the majority community and some of the Hindu fundamentalist organizations added to the severity of the riot. A brawl between a Muslim vegetable vendor and his Hindu customer snowballed into a major Hindu-Muslim riot in which Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist organizations were actively involved, and the town saw three continuous days of arson and looting. Property worth 2 million rupees was damaged (many Muslim shops were either looted or destroyed) and 18 people were injured in the clashes.¹⁶ The most significant feature of this communal clash was the indirect involvement of political parties,¹⁷ which was absent in the authoritarian political system of pre-1990 Nepal. The indifferent attitude of the Nepali Congress government of the day and the tardiness of the local administration in firmly dealing with the situation only implied that the state hesitated to take stringent action against mindless acts of vandalism for fear of losing popular support.

Two aspects emerge from a study of the contexts of Hindu-Muslim conflict. These are, firstly, that communal clashes in Nepal remained a rare event as long as the Muslim minorities kept a very subdued and low profile, and did not raise any objection to their low caste status, or the overall deprivation they suffered for professing a religion which was considered inferior to the official one. But, once they began to show signs of assertiveness, either because of their numerical strength in some Tarai areas, or because of democratic aspirations that found expression in post-1991 Nepal, the Hindu majoritarian state and society have always reacted aggressively, pressing home the point that, although religious freedom has been granted by the Constitution, the religious minorities must remem-

¹⁵ *Nepal Press Report*, Kathmandu, December 13, 1994; and *Kathmandu Post*, December 8, 1994. See also *Janmanch*, January 1995.

¹⁶ The active involvement of Nepali Congress leaders who were also members of the Vishwa Hindu Sangh hinted at the support being provided by the Nepali Congress party for the Hindus in the October 1995 riots. Shiv Sena (Nepal) and Muslim Ekta Sangh leaders were among the list of people arrested for instigating violence. See INSEC 1995, and *Kathmandu Post*, October 28, 30, 1995.

¹⁷ During her interview with the Banke CDO, Thaneshwar Koirala, in December 1996, the author also gained the impression that the Nepali Congress Party and the Communist Party (UML) were involved with the Hindus and Muslims respectively.

ber that the Hindu upper-caste groups will always dominate because of the country's declared status as a 'Hindu Kingdom'. In this context, it can be argued that due to Muslims' growing assertion of their identity in the changed political environment, the Ayodhya issue in India is having a more direct bearing on Hindu-Muslim relations in some of the border towns of the Tarai. The proliferation of fundamentalist elements within both the Hindu and Muslim communities (namely, the Shiv Sena, Bajarang Dal, and Muslim Ekta Sangh) in places like Birganj and Nepalganj is a post-Ayodhya (1992) phenomenon. Any mobilization by Hindu militant organizations in support of the Rama Temple in Ayodhya in these towns has encountered open resentment from the Muslim community, in contrast to their subdued behaviour in the past.

Secondly, the entry of political parties in the political system of the country has also heralded the emergence of 'vote-banks'. The attention that the Muslims have received since 1990 from the major national parties is basically guided by electoral considerations. The indirect involvement of the Nepali Congress, the National Democratic Party, and the Communists (UML) in the October 1995 Nepalganj riots, when each was obliquely aligned either with the majority or the minority community, did leave an impact on the electorates of this communally sensitive region.¹⁸

The formation of All Nepal Muslim bodies with the active support of the two national political parties (the CPN and UML) backed the All Nepal Muslim Etehad Association, and the NC backed the All Nepal Muslim Samaj Seva Sangh, further confirm a new trend of garnering the support of the Muslim 'vote-bank'.¹⁹ The encouragement for creating a Muslim wing of each party has become all the more apparent since detailed data has been furnished on the main ethnic/caste composition of Nepalese districts. A study revealed that Muslims are in a majority in four of the 19 Tarai districts (Rautahat, Parsa, Kapilbastu, and Banke); in second position in as many as five districts (Bara, Mahottari, Dhanusha, Siraha, and Sunsari); and in third position in two districts (Rupandehi and Sarlahi) (Gurung 1994). Thus the sizeable Muslim population in all these 11 Tarai districts has certainly made the community an attractive electoral proposition for the mainstream political parties. The available voter lists also show that in around 17 constituencies in the Tarai the number of Muslim voters amounts to 15,000 or more,²⁰ which means that if Muslims voted *en masse* for a particular candidate that candidate would win.

¹⁸ The fact that Maluna Jabbar, one of the most influential Muslim religious leaders of Nepalganj, joined the Communist Party (UML) in the post 1995 riots pointed to the pro-Muslim stand of the party in the communally sensitive region of Nepalganj.

¹⁹ The Muslim wing of the Nepali Congress party, the Nepal Muslim Samaj Seva Sangh, was established in 1995 in Biratnagar (the constituency of the former N.C. Prime Minister G.P. Koirala). An active member of the Nepali Congress from Biratnagar, Hasan Ansari, was made the President of the Sangh. In its ninth Annual Convention in May 1996, the party also passed a resolution in support of two national holidays for the Islamic festivals of Id and Bakri-Id. See *Report of IXth Convention of Nepali Congress May 10-12 1996*, resolution No.348.

²⁰ Information provided by a Muslim MP from the Tarai, during an interview with the writer in December 1996.

However, the records of the two past general elections show that in Nepal political elites have not really touched upon the issue of participation by ethnic and tribal communities. Thus it remains to be seen whether the parties will actually field only Muslim candidates in the Muslim majority constituencies in forthcoming elections. The sociology of political parties, especially the composition of their leadership, reveals a combination of upper castes (Bahun, Chetri, and Newar), and does not reflect the pluralistic composition of the society.²¹

Dilemmas of a minority psyche

The dilemmas of the Nepalese Muslims can best be understood by the fact that they do not only share a deprived status with many other low caste and backward groups, but their 'reversed' (*ulto*) religious identity is considered not merely as inferior to the official religion but also as a threat to the Hindu social order. Thus, having maintained such a dismal image in society for a long time, the community is yet to fully absorb its constitutional status of equality with its Hindu counterparts. The fact that in this new political system the vote of a Muslim carries the same weight as that of a Hindu, and that the Muslims can enjoy all the freedoms and rights of equal citizens of the country, has certainly put the community in a psychological dilemma about its future group behaviour. On the one hand, Muslims are being enticed by the participatory political culture and are beginning to demand their rightful share from the democratic state of Nepal. On the other, there also exists a feeling of fear and apprehension about the Hindu state's reaction to their effort to assert themselves as a religious group with a separate religious and cultural history. For most of the Tarai Muslims, safety from bloody communal carnage is also a matter of serious concern, especially when they compare themselves with their more vocal and assertive Muslim brethren on the Indian side of the border, and find them under the threat of majority backlash. Hence the idea of being vocal about their rights is also accompanied by apprehension, as they perceive themselves to be facing the same threat.²²

Evaluating Muslim group behaviour against the backdrop of an on-going democratization process in Nepal, it can be said that, as far as participation in open electoral politics is concerned, Muslims have shown considerable enthusiasm. In the first multi-party elections in 1991, of the 31 Muslim candidates who contested from various constituencies in the Tarai, 12 candidates represented mainstream parties (NC, UPN, UML, NSP, and RPP), and the rest either contested as independents or on smaller party tickets.²³ In the 1994 elections, although the number of Muslim contestants fell from 31 to 24, 17 were contesting on behalf of major national parties. While indicating the increased interest of the political parties in fielding Muslim candidates, this also spoke of growing political maturity

²¹ In the opinion of Lok Raj Baral, this upper-caste bias in the composition of the leadership of major political parties cannot be wished away easily unless opportunities are made available to the less privileged communities (Baral 1995).

²² This was the general impression of the author after interacting with the Muslim peasantry residing in villages near to the Indian border.

²³ The list of 31 Muslim contestants has been drawn from Election Commission (1992).

and awareness of voting behaviour on the part of Muslims (Election Commission 1995). In 1991, of the five elected Muslim MPs, three were from the Nepali Congress, but general discontent among the Muslims about the non-performance of these MPs ensured their defeat in 1994. The defeat of the sitting Muslim MP (even from Muslim majority constituencies like Banke-3) suggests that Muslim votes cannot be taken for granted.²⁴ Another trend that emerges from Muslim electoral behaviour in the 1994 elections is that there has been no en-masse voting by Muslims for Muslim candidates, and that they consider both party and individual while voting. Even in constituencies with around 15,000 Muslim voters, Muslim candidates have lost their security deposits.²⁵ The four successful Muslim candidates in the 1994 elections represented four different parties (Anis Ansari represented the NSP, Sheikh Idris represented the Nepali Congress, Salim Ansari represented the CPN(UML), and Mirza Dilshad Beg represented the RPP).²⁶ This also sheds light on the Muslim psyche, and on their common apprehension that aligning with one single party would not be beneficial for the community, because when the party with which the Muslims were aligned was out of power the new party in power would not pay any heed to Muslim causes.²⁷

The dilemma of a minority psyche is also apparent among the Muslims of the western hill districts of Syangja, Gorkha, Tanahu, Kaski, etc. Though they are considered the Muslim social group in Nepal which has assimilated the most into the milieu of hill Hinduism, the hill Muslims too have begun to protest strongly against their *churaute* identity. However, although their discontent with their still generally low social status in the hill villages and resentment over administrative discrimination has been gaining ground over the past few years,²⁸ it has yet to be expressed openly because of the fear that it might incur a majority backlash against them. Nevertheless, the fact that after years of isolation hill Muslims participated in good numbers in the All Nepal Muslim Meet in 1996, does reveal a desire

²⁴ In Banke district the Nepali Congress won seats in the 1991 elections, but in the 1994 elections disillusionment with the party among a large group of Muslim voters (for showing scant regard for Muslim sentiments during the communal tension of 1992 and other times) led to defeat, including that of the Muslim candidate, Meraj Ahmed, as the Muslims in the constituency voted against him.

²⁵ It has been pointed out by Muslim leaders that in Bara constituency 1, where there are around 15,000 Muslims, the Muslim candidate from Rashtriya Prajatantra Party lost by a heavy margin. Similarly, in Parsa constituency 1, in spite of the large number of Muslim voters, the lone Muslim candidate lost his deposit.

²⁶ Mirza Dilshad Beg, who came from the Gonda district of Uttar Pradesh (India), and was wanted in many criminal cases in India, was elected from Kapilbastu-4 (a Muslim-dominated constituency) in 1991 and 1994. He had confessed to his involvement in cross-border smuggling before he entered political life in Nepal. Mirza Dilshad Beg was assassinated in Kathmandu in early 1998. In the 1999 general elections there was no serious Muslim candidate in Kapilbastu-4, which elected Ajay Pratap Shah, the RPP candidate.

²⁷ Muslim intellectuals, including Dr Abullaish and Dr Hamid Ansari, believe that Muslims should align with different parties constituency-wise to get maximum service for the community from the various parties.

²⁸ Muslim villagers of Tanahu and Syangja districts complained to the author about their still

to join the greater Muslim forum which is being floated to communicate the Muslims' demands to the Nepalese state.

A study of the major demands put forward by most of the Muslim bodies to the state reveals that, in spite of their efforts to organize on one single platform (such as the Ettehad Association), there is not much unanimity about the nature of their demands. Like their counterparts in other parts of the subcontinent, Muslims in Nepal are influenced most by the Maulanas (clergy) and Islamic religious bodies in articulating their main demands in relation to the state. Thus, when it comes to uplifting the community from all its backwardness and social evils by asking for support from the state, differences appear between the reformist Muslim leaders and the clergy, who, for instance, would not like to give up their hold over the Islamic religious schools (Madrassas and Makhtabs).

The All Nepal Muslim Ettehad Association calls for the constitution of a 'Madrasa Board' by the government, which would recommend the necessary steps to modernize the Islamic religious schools (for example, the introduction of a modern Nepali school curriculum along with the Islamic teachings). This would thereafter ensure that such centres, imparting modern learning as well as Islamic education, received financial aid from the state, like other Nepali primary schools, and were also recognized by the Nepali government (as is the practice in the case of other educational institutions in Nepal).²⁹ However, this demand does not find enough support among the Maulanas who run the Madrassas, or among the illiterate and ignorant Muslim masses, who believe their religious leaders' advice that any kind of state interference in the functioning of Madrassas would undermine the Islamic character of these places.³⁰

The reformists agree that this negative attitude towards modern education keeps the majority of Nepalese Muslims ignorant and backward, and also helps the state to remain indifferent to demands such as (i) recognition of the purely religious education provided in these madrassas; (ii) recruitment and subsequent promotion of Muslims in all levels of state service such as the army, the police, constitutional bodies, the judiciary, and the

prevailing 'water unacceptable' status in the villages; and also about how they are discriminated against for being Muslims by the officials of the district administration even today. One 24-year-old youth from Dhule Gauda village of Tanahu district claimed that he was harassed by the office of the CDO for a week before receiving his citizenship card (to which he was entitled on the grounds of being a hereditary citizen whose family settled in Tanahu many generations ago), whereas a Hindu friend who had accompanied him, and was also a claimant on the basis of hereditary rules, got his citizenship card on the very first day.

²⁹ Resolutions passed by the Second National Conference of the Nepal Muslim Ettehad Association, Kathmandu, August 18-19, 1996. Also see 'Strategy in Improving Education among the Muslim Community of Nepal', a working paper presented to the said conference.

³⁰ Such is the stand maintained by most of the Maulavis of the madrassas in Nepal, especially the prominent ones in Janakpur (Maulavi Jais), Bhutaha, Krishnanagar (Maulana Rauf and Abdullah Madni), and Nepalganj (Maulana Jabbar), because they believe that government funding and supervision would curtail the religious autonomy of their institutions.

diplomatic service. A survey of the ethnic composition of graduates in Nepal shows that Muslims constitute a dismal 0.37 percent of the total. The same study also shows that among the Section Officer level bureaucrats in the country, the representation of the Muslims is only 0.29 percent (Poudyal 1992). Compared to their share of the total population, 0.37 percent representation among graduates and 0.29 percent representation in the administrative machinery—and that too at the lower administrative level of section officer, as there are hardly any Muslims at the Joint Secretary and Secretary levels of the bureaucracy—speaks of the overall backwardness of the community. Hence it corroborates the urgent need for unanimity among the Muslims in reforming their educational system, so that they can press the state to play a more positive role towards the community.

However, there is little difference within the community regarding its demands for public holidays to be declared on three major Islamic festivals (Id, Bakri-id, and Moharram). Interestingly, although the two major national parties, the Nepali Congress and the CPN (UML) have expressed their support for this demand, neither declared these to be holidays during their term of office.

In essence, the growth of consciousness among the backward ethnic and minority groups is undeniably making nation-building a very challenging task for the state in democratic Nepal. In particular, the integration of non-Hindus into a national mainstream which has Hinduism as the state religion is one of the more serious issues to have emerged from the process of political modernization, and calls for deep introspection on the part of the modern Nepali state. In this respect, it is important to note that in post-1990 Nepal the state has yet to show its resolve in accommodating the cultural demands of the religious minorities or the Janajātis who do not consider themselves to be Hindus. The dominance of Hindu norms and values in public life is instead making the non-Hindus wary of the authenticity of the constitutional position relating to the state's duty to uphold the pluralist character of its society. Though ethnic cleavages in Nepal have yet to become a threat to the national society, it is imperative for the Nepali state to withstand diverse identity assertion by the members of different social groups, and even accommodate their moderate demands—for, if ignored for long, the pulls of such a multicultural society have the potential to lead Nepal into a major crisis of national integration. In the same vein, apathy towards the Muslims and their legitimate grievances, or alarm at the slightest affirmation of Islamic cultural identity, will only alienate the Muslims further from the process of nation-building. On the other hand, by accommodating the moderate demands and cultural aspirations³¹ of this minority group, the state would actually help the liberals in their effort to uplift their community from its extreme educational backwardness and subsequently from its deprived economic and social status.

³¹ These aspirations include the constitution by the state of a Madrasa Board to modernize the traditional Islamic schools, and in the process grant recognition to that mode of education; the provision of equal opportunities to Muslims at all levels of state services; the declaration of holidays on the major Islamic festivals. These demands have the support of all the Muslim MPs as well as all the eminent members of the community.

Furthermore, the state's active role in promoting the welfare of Muslims can also keep the forces of Islamic fundamentalism at bay. In the absence of discontent among the members of the community, there would be little support for obscurantism and the neo-fundamentalist school of Islam, which risks making the Muslim minorities suspect in the eyes of the government and its majority population. Thus, with the required political maturity, the democratic state in Nepal can not only instil confidence in the minority psyche of Muslims, but can also reduce the historical disparities which exist between various cultural groups, due to the centuries-old practice of monolithic statecraft, and promote social harmony in this kingdom of great diversity.

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