CHAPTER III

MUSLIM MINORITIES IN NEPAL:
A HISTORICAL AND
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE
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Muslims constitute the most distinct and well defined minority group in the Hindu kingdom of Nepal. Besides their adherence to Islam, their ethno-cultural affiliation too, make Muslims represent a discrete identity in a predominantly Hindu-Buddhist accultural set up. A small minority as per the census figures, 6,53,218 Muslims in Nepal comprise 3.5 percent (1991 census report) of the total population. Nevertheless, they form the second largest religious minority group only next to the Buddhist (7.78 percent, 1991 census), who constitute the main religious minority group in Hindu Nepal. The 1991 census data, which for the first time enlisted sixty four ethnic & caste groups, are however termed as misleading by most of these ethnic/caste groups - members. Many Muslims as well as Hindus in Nepal believe that the exact figure of the Muslim population in Nepal is much higher than shown in the census, and they constitute not less than 6 percent of the total population.¹

Keeping in view the number of small ethnic and caste groups (i.e. whose size is smaller on account of having members well below 5,00,000) that exist in Nepal, an argument is also being forwarded that 6,53,218 Muslims actually constitute one of the ten major 'national' groups in Nepal whose membership exceed above 5,00,000 and therefore they should not be categorised as a minority group. Needless to say that such argument is but a simplified way of addressing a complex issue, because the phrase 'minority' is used in terms of the community's religious identity (significantly different from the rest of the population) as well as for its non dominant and deprived socio-economic status. To study the Muslim minority community in Nepal it is essential to first trace the beginning of Muslim arrival and their subsequent settlement pattern in Nepal.

Historical Antecedents

Nepal's first contact with Islamic (Arab) world is a widely speculated topic. Whether Nepal had any direct trade relations with the Arab world or was it through some intermediary Indian kingdom, couldn't be ascertained for lack of concrete historical evidence. But one can trace the earliest mention of Nepal in the Arabic book "Hudood-Al-Alam" published in 789 A.D., which narrates the fact that musk was exported to Arabian countries from Nepal. The fact that Nepal was a major exporter of musk during the rule of Lichchavi dynasty (7th century A.D.) can be established from the Tistung


inscription of the famous Lichchavi ruler Amshu Verma. It further states that wool, musk, bronze utensils were exported to different countries. But neither the inscriptions, nor the Arabic book 'Hudood-Al-Alam' mention that Nepal had some kind of direct commercial relations with the Arab world.

The repeated Turk invasions and subsequent establishment of Muslim rule in north India during 11th century A.D., also did not bring Nepal into direct contact with the Muslim world, though it did have indirect impacts, the influx of Hindu (Rajput) ruling families, and some Buddhist scholars from Nalanda and Vikramshila Universities into Nepal, was a direct fallout of the Muslim invasion in northern India. There seems to be no second opinion that the first direct contact that Nepal had with the Muslims was only in 1324 A.D. (14th century) when Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, the emperor of Delhi, took the route through Simra region of Nepal terai, while he was returning to Delhi after crushing a rebellion in Bengal. King Hari Singh Dev who ruled an independent kingdom in Simra, under the apprehension that Tughlaq's army had designs to attack his capital Simrangarh, came out to challenge him, and there followed the famous battle in which, for the first time, any Nepalese capital (Simrangarh) was destroyed by a Muslim ruler. King Hari Singh Dev had to flee to mountains with his entourage.

The people of Kathmandu valley however, came to experience the first Muslim invasion only in 1349 A.D. when Sultan Samsuddin of Bengal attacked and plundered the

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5 Ibid. p.22.
6 Ibid. Also see Shamima Siddika, Muslims of Nepal (Kathmandu, 1993), p.103.
Kathmandu valley. Bhaktapur, the then seat of Malla rulers along with the twin cities of Kantipur (now Kathmandu) and Lalitpur faced the havoc of the invading army for near about seven days - since collecting the booty was Samsuddin's army's prime motive and not territorial expansion. Nevertheless, evidences of religious hatred could be felt when after plundering, the attackers also destroyed the temple of Lord Pashupati Nath and Chaitya (Buddhist Monument) of Swayambhu. Historical records thus speak of the first Muslim invasion in Nepal, but do not mention anything about their settlement in Nepal for more than one century that followed sultan Samsuddin's invasion.

Beginning of Muslim Settlement in Nepal: Nepalese chronicles (Vamshavalis) mention that the first Muslims to settle in Nepal were the Kashmiri traders who came to Nepal during the reign of King Ratna Malla (1484-1520 AD). The traders travelled between Kashmir and Lhasa via Kathmandu, came to Nepal after they were invited to Kathmandu by the envoy of Ratna Malla in Lhasa. Kashmiri Muslims were also appointed as scribes for King Ratna Malla to organise the Munshi Khana and to correspond with the Delhi Sultanate.

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9 Dr. Mohammed Mohsin, Senior Rashtriya Praja Party Leader, in an interview with the author on 24th May 1994. Also Sayeduddin's (Ex. Chairman Panch Kashmiri Taquia, Kathmandu) interview with the author on 29th May, 1994.
The second phase of Muslims arrival in Nepal was at the end of 17th century, when the Chaubisi Kings of Nepal's western hills, impressed by the superior skills of Mughal army in using firearms, invited Muslims artillerist and artisans from India to train their army in manufacturing firearms. The descendants of most of these western hill Muslims came to be known as Churaote (bangle sellers) as many of them got into that profession, along with farming, ever since their services to the Chaubisi kings became redundant in lieu of the unification of all principalities under the supreme leadership of the Gorkha king Prithi Narayan Shah.

However, the most significant wave of Muslims to enter Nepal was at the aftermath of Britishers' crushing of 1857 Mutiny in India. It included the members of Mughal royal families in Delhi and Lucknow viz. Begum Hazrat Mahal (one of the wives of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow), and Maulana Sarfaraz Ali Shah, a mufti of the last Mughal emperor Bahadur· Shah Zafar who arrived with the entourage of Begum Hazrat Mahal, and took shelter in Kathmandu. The Muslims reached other parts of Nepal Terai as agricultural labourers to till the lands from the border states of India but a substantial increase in their population took place when Nepal received some new territories such as Nepalgunj in the western Terai from British India.

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11 As narrated to the author by one of the direct descendants, and famous Nepali poet, Lok Kavi Ali Miya of Western hill district of Kaski.

The last and final group of Muslims, to arrive in Nepal, are those of Tibetan origin. They arrived mostly after the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959. Approximately hundred families of Tibetan Muslims are found in the Kathmandu valley and most of them are engaged in profitable carpet business and are considered to be more affluent than other members of Muslim community.

Islamic Influences: The Muslims entry into Nepal might have had a chequered history but there had been definite Islamic influence on the art of governance and the cultural life of both Buddhist and Hindu rulers of Nepal. The consolidation of great Mughal rule in India, especially under emperor Akbar, had definite but subtle impact on administrative pattern and defence system of independent principalities in Nepal. It became evident when Bhaktapur, Lalitpur and Kantipur were converted as fort cities similar to many fort cities which were the seat of power in India. The other significant influence of Muslim defence system was the installation of cannons by smaller hill kingdoms such as Lamjung and Gorkha.

Besides adopting the military techniques the influence of Persian (the court language of the Mughals) on many Nepali usages is evident in terms like Dewan, Baxi, Kazi, Sardar, Umrao, Kotwal, Majhab etc. That the knowledge of Persian language was much appreciated is clear in Malla Kings interest in compiling volume entitled "Light on Persian Composition" with explanatory notes in Newari language. King Pratap Malla had

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13 Sharma, n.10, p.36.
14 Banu, n.4, p.24-25, and Shamima Siddika, n.6, p.106.
also inscribed Urdu on his coins. From the portraits of Malla kings as well as statues of Prithvinarayan Shah, the first Gorkha ruler of unified Nepal, it can be said that the then rulers had adopted Muslim (Mughal's) style of dressing up too. From headgear to shoes, this influence was clearly evident.

It was during Malla period only that few Muslims ever occupied the posts of courtiers and counsellors. Vamshavalis (Nepalese historical records) mention that King Bhaskar Malla's court in the early 18th century had Muslim nobility, and it was during his reign that the Muslims ever held such influential positions within the precincts of the Durbar. However, their (Muslims) rise to such important positions was highly resented by Newar and Khasa nobles who played as predominant role in the royal court. The growing influence of the Muslims in the court soon turned the local resentment into bitter rivalry as the nobility began to make plot against the outsiders (i.e. the Muslims), and in the end, Muslims had to reconcile with their insignificant status as aliens, so vigorously pointed out by the Newar and Khasa nobility. This can be described as the first ever conflict (recorded in history), between the Muslims and the local people, ever since the beginning of Muslim settlement in Nepal. Gorkha King, Prithvi Narayan Shah's campaign to conquer the Kathmandu valley brought him in touch with the Kashmiri Muslim traders, when he sought their help for cooperating with his economic blockade of the valley. In return, he promised them land grants and royal sanction for trade after the conquest. A

15 Ibid.
16 I.R. Aryal, n.7, p.102-103. And Dundiraj Bhandari, n.8, p.130.
demarcated territory of Muslim settlement along with the first mosque that came up in Kathmandu was the outcome of the royal promise.\textsuperscript{18} Besides, Muslim artillerists (of western hills) also played an important role in Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification campaign, as they helped him in the production of weapons for warfare.

Demographic Trends

The latest census of 1991 says that 3.53 percent of the total population (18491907) of Nepal are of Muslim population, who constitute the second largest religious minority group of Nepal, and following table shows us geographic region-wise demographic trends of the Muslims (along with the Hindus and Buddhists) over the past 30 years.

\textsuperscript{18} Banu, n.4, pp.32-35. And Rajesh Gautam, ibid., pp.7-8.
Table 3. Geographic Zonewise Distribution of Major Religious Groups and their Percentage over the Census Years from 1971-1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>Census year</th>
<th>All persons</th>
<th>Hindus</th>
<th>Buddhists</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>11,555,983</td>
<td>10,330,009</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>866,411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>15,022,839</td>
<td>13,445,787</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>799,081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>18,491,097</td>
<td>15,996,953</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1,439,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>1,138,610</td>
<td>938,617</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>199,674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>1,302,896</td>
<td>1,111,967</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>159,091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>1,1443,130</td>
<td>1,135,678</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>265,014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>6,071,407</td>
<td>5,439,279</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>617,195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>7,163,115</td>
<td>6,447,523</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>507,214</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>8,419,889</td>
<td>7,176,878</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>972,255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terai</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>4,345,966</td>
<td>3,952,113</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>49,542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>6,556,828</td>
<td>5,886,297</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>132,776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>8,628,078</td>
<td>7,684,397</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>201,873</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


From the above table it is evident that inspite of showing a low figure in both absolute and percentage terms, the population of Muslims in Nepal is significant for being one of the three major religious groups in Nepal. Even though the members of the Muslim
community feel that there had been gross underestimation by the census enumerators in presenting the exact figures and growth rate of the Muslims.  

Nepal since the year 1911 has so far taken nine censuses approximately at an interval of ten years. However, Muslim population statistics are available only from 1952-54 census onwards. Hamid Ansari, the first Nepali Muslim scholar to study his own community, is of the opinion that if one compares the 1971 census data with a CNAS Report on Indian "Ethnic Groups in Nepal" (1978), the under-reporting done in 1971 census becomes obvious. As the CNAS Report talked of more than 50 thousand Muslims living in Sunsari district of Terai alone, which was about three times more than the census result (that showed 19,373 Muslims in the Sunsari district of Terai). Similarly, the above report gave an estimated figure of about 10,000 Muslim residents in Jhapa district, which was again quite higher than the census figure (7,765). Hamid Ansari thus observes that the reliability of data on Muslim population is highly questionable.  

While the 1971 census shows 3.04 percent of Muslims out of total population in Nepal, the percentage goes down to 2.66 in the 1981 census, leaving little doubt about the discrepancy that exists in presenting census data of the Muslim population, since the average annual rate of population growth had always been higher.

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19 Dr. Abdullaish (Assoc. Professor, Centre for Economic Development and Administration, CEDA), and Dr. Dilli Ram Dahal (CNAS) in conversation with the author in May 1994.


21 Ibid. p.16.
Dr. Hamid Ansari in his study has also tried to explain the other possible reasons for Muslim populations' fluctuating rate of growth, presented by various census reports. He feels that, initially illiterate Muslim masses feared that census was carried out to regularise taxation. It was also due to the errors on part of the enumerators in compiling the data. As rightly pointed out that 'Churaote' Muslims were categorised under "Other" religion. As the category of "Others" increased from 0.4% in 1971 to 2.43% in 1981, while the numbers of Muslims decreased in the same censuses. 22 Even the 1991 census list on caste and ethnic groups show 'Churaote' Muslims as a separate caste, and therefore do not add their numerical strength to that of the Muslim (See Appendix-I).

**Regional Distribution:** The distribution of Muslim population in Nepal is quite dispersed, and mainly concentrated in the outlying areas along the Indian border. Nevertheless, population data based on the 1991 census shows that except for north-western districts of Manang Muslims can be found in all other districts, i.e. they are present in 74 out of the total 75 districts of Nepal. 23 Their distribution, however, is extremely uneven - while we find 42,850 or 45,787 Muslims present in the terai districts of Rupandehi and Banke respectively, their number can be as low as 2 and 3 in mountaineous districts of Dolpa and Jumla respectively. 24 (See Appendix-II).

The contrariness of census figures is evident when 1971 census showed Muslims as 3.04 percent of the total population (11555983) and were present only in 67 out of the

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24 Ibid.
total 75 districts, whereas in 1981, Muslim population only formed 2.66 percent of the total population (150222839) but shown present in almost all the districts barring two. In his attempt to calculate the regional distribution of Muslims in Nepal, Hamid Ansari observes that their percentage roughly fluctuates between 17% to 0.4% of the total population in the districts.  

Since the inhabitants of Nepal are broadly seen in the light of three elevational zones or ecological regions, viz. Terai, Hills and Mountains, it is found that 97 percent of Nepalese Muslims live in Terai, while the remaining 3 percent is scattered over the other two regions viz. in Western hills and Kathmandu valley. For administrative purposes Nepal is further divided into five developmental regions - Eastern, Central, Western, Mid-western and Far-western. It is significant to note that Central Terai region, houses almost half of the total Muslim population of Nepal. This is largely because districts like Rautahat (17.2% Muslims out of the total population in the district), Bara (11.9%) and Parsa (12.3%) in this region are all bordered with the Muslim populated pockets of Indian state of Bihar. Western Terai region - Kapilbastu (16.8%), Banke (16%), and Eastern Terai region with districts like Siraha (7%), Sunsari (10%) follow one another in terms of the number of Muslims present in the entire Terai belt.

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25 H. Ansari, n.3, p.18.


27 Ibid.
It may be noted here that there are 18 districts in Terai, which have common border with Indian states, and they are: (1) Kanchanpur, (2) Kailali (3) Baitadi (4) Banke (5) Kapilbastu (6) Rupandehi (7) Nawalparsi (8) Parsa (9) Bara (10) Rautahat (11) Sarlahi (12) Mahottari (13) Dhanusa (14) Siraha (15) Saptari (16) Sunsari (17) Morang and (18) Jhapa.

Cultural Profile of Muslim Social Groups

While providing a distinct communal group identity, religion does not necessarily provide the community a common territorial history, language and lifestyle. In the same light, Muslims in Nepal are not a homogenous entity in terms of their dispersal, language and lifestyle. As mentioned earlier, Muslims in Nepal are settled in clusters in the southern plains (Terai); in the Kathmandu valley; and in the Western Hills of Nepal. Apart from their regional identity, their place of origin and social attributes are also considered while classifying the Nepalese Muslims into various social groups.

Muslims in Nepal are broadly classified as (1) Kashmiri Muslims, (2) Terai Muslims, and (3) Hill Muslims (commonly known as Churaote), but another small group that also exists, is (4) Tibetan Muslims.

Kashmiri Muslims: The descendants of the earliest Muslim settlers in Nepal - the Kashmiri traders, are still based in Kathmandu, and identify themselves as the Kashmiri Muslims of Kathmandu - even though they have little or no link with the Indian state of Kashmir except as the place of origin of their ancestors. There are around 100 families of Kashmiri Muslims in Kathmandu at present. Most of them are engaged in small business
(own bangles & beads shops), however there are few families who are into big business (viz. Gems and jewellery business, & Trading houses). In sum, their economic condition is quite satisfactory, this is largely because the respectable position they had once enjoyed in the society. Before the advent of the Ranas, Malla & Shah rulers had even made land grants to them in recognition of their services to the rulers of the valley. Kashmiri Muslims speak both Urdu and Nepali. In fact Urdu spoken by them at home is heavily influenced by Nepali due to their century old association with the land and the language; senior members of the community are even fluent in Newari (original language of the valley). The assimilation of the community with the local hill culture is thus evident. Though their religious life is very much guided by the basic tenets of Islam viz *Namaz* (daily prayers); *Zakat* (alms to the poor); *Roja* (fasting); *Haj* (annual pilgrimage to Mecca), they mainly belong to the more liberal Hanifi School of the Sunni sect, which respect Sufi culture (i.e. believing in Sufi Saints as messengers of God).

Besides the Kashmiris, native Kathmandu Muslims also consist of the descendants of the Mughals (popularly known as 'Hindustani' Muslim), their ancestors entered the valley along with the entourage of Begum of Lucknow, Begum Hazrat Mahal, her son and a Kazi of Mughal court in Delhi Maulana Sarfaraz Ali, when they sought asylum in Kathmandu in the aftermath of 1857 war of Independence against British East India Company. Some of the ancestors of the Hindustani Muslims had been staying in

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28 Found out while interviewing the members of Kashmiri community in Kathmandu. As also narrated by Salim Shah one of the few Kashmiri big businessmen of Kathmandu, in an interview with the author on Dec. 15, 1996.

29 Ibid. Also refer Dr. Mohd. Mohsin, n.9.

30 Sayeduddin (Ex-Chairman Kashmiri Tauqia) n.9. Also refer S.Sharma, n.6, p.39.
Kathmandu since the days of Prithvi Narayan Shah as artillerists and cavalrymen in his army. The present day Nepali Jame masjid in Kathmandu was built at the behest of Maulana Sarfaraz Ali when he developed some differences with the management of the then existing Kashmiri Tauqia (mosque). While the Jame Masjid has emerged as the main mosque for congregation of Kathmandu Muslims and a strong platform for the more puritanical Deobandi school, native Kashmiri's have still remained faithful to the Kashmiri Tauqia which follows the Barelvi school and believes in more liberal interpretation of Koran.

*Churaotes* are the other prominent social group among the hill Muslims. Natives of the western hill districts, *Churaotes* as mentioned earlier have been living in the hills since the days of Baise Chaubise Kingdoms. They subsequently settled down in those hills as makers of agricultural implements utensils and ornaments. Although agriculture remained their primary source of livelihood as all of them were granted lands by the local rulers, with the increase in their population and growing fragmentation of cultivable lands, bangle selling became a common profession among the Muslim farmers of the hills. Hence they gradually got associated with the term 'Churaote' (derived from the Nepali word for Bangle i.e. 'Churi') although the Hill Muslims now strongly resent this term, and with the rise in consciousness about their distinct religious identity, they prefer to be identified only as 'Muslims' and not by a 'derogatory' term like 'Churaote'.

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31 Ibid. Also see Quraisha Banu, n.4, p.41.

32 The popular resentment about the term *Churaote* was felt by the author during her interactions with native hill Muslims of Kaski and Tanahu.
Out of 55 hill district hill Muslims are found in as many as 48 districts, but their presence is prominent only in the western and central hill districts of Gorkha, Tanahu, Kaski, Syangja, Palpa Pyuthan, Arga Khanchi and Dailekh. The latest census shows the 'Churaotes' as a separate caste, and are not included in the category of Muslims. Their figures are shown as 1,778 only, whereas district wise religious composition of the same census clearly indicate that the 10 western hill districts have at least 8,645 Muslims. For centuries these Muslim habitants of the remote hills have remained secluded from outside influences (even from Islamic influences) it was but natural that they got acculturated with the Hindu hill milieu to a considerable extent. They are proficient only in Nepali which has become their mother tongue, however those who have received Madarsa education can also speak broken Urdu. In their dress, food habit and certain local customs hill Muslims are almost indistinguishable from their Hindu neighbours.

Like the Kashmiri Muslims of Kathmandu, hill Muslims are also strict believer of Barelvi (Sufi) School of Islam. In line with the beliefs of Barelvi school which tends to be more accommodating of local customs and practices, hill Muslims are not puritanical in their observance of Islamic rituals and culture. Puritans (mostly from the Terai) often accuse them of being ignorant of zakat (money given as charity during religious festivals), and that they lightly dispense with basic Islamic tents like daily namaz (prayers), roza

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33 HMG, Central Bureau of Statistics, Population Census 1991, Kathmandu, 1993, pp.50-51. (for Table see Appendix-II). Hamid Ansari cited the figures of Muslim presence in 48 hill districts in his original paper 'Muslims in Nepal' which was later published, see H. Ansari n.3.

34 For population distribution by religion for districts, see HMG, CBS Year Book, Kathmandu, 1993, pp.21-25.

35 Observations, n.32.
(religious fasting) and *nikah* (Islamic wedding). Notwithstanding the criticism it is significant to note that even after the high rate of assimilation, all of them are strict about 'Halal' and 'Haram' while consuming meat. They would never accept meat from a non-Muslim.\(^{36}\) This speaks of the consciousness about their separate religious identity which the Muslims in the remote hills have conserved over the centuries, inspite of the socio-cultural assimilation.

**Terai Muslims:** The third group i.e. the Terai or the Madhesi Muslims, in contrast to both Kathmandu Muslims and the Western hill Muslims, are more akin to the religious and cultural life prevalent in the Muslim populated districts of north Indian states of U.P. & Bihar. Geographical contiguity is largely responsible for the close cultural proximity that the Terai community (both Muslims and Hindus) enjoys with their brethren across the border. Terai Muslims, who comprise 96% of the total Muslims population in Nepal, thus have little or no influence of the distinct hill-Hindu culture and maintain staunch religious identity guided by the tenets of Islam - unlike their counterparts in the hills. Though most of them speak Urdu, their mother tongue however depend upon the location of their districts, for e.g. Muslims of Bara, Parsa districts which are in the central region, speak Bhojpuri. Whereas in the eastern district of Sunsari and Mahottari, it is Maithili. Similarly in the western districts of Banke and Kapilbastu, Awadhi is spoken by the majority.

Thus as far as common history, language and lifestyle (social practices) are concerned, differences do exist between the Hill and the Terai Muslims. While Kathmandu and the hill Muslims are culturally more Nepalised, the Terai Muslims, far removed from

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\(^{36}\) Famous Nepali poet and folk singer 'Lok Kabi' Ali Miya (a native hill Muslim of Kaski district), emphasised this fact while talking to the author.
the traditional centres of power and dominant Parbatiya culture, have greater identification with the plainsmen of Nepal's Terai, and larger Muslim population across the border. However, with the modernisation of communication and regular and frequent movements of Teraians in Kathmandu for job and education, the hill-terai division among the Nepalese Muslims is gradually getting eroded.

Politicisation of Muslim Ethnic Identity:

Although Muslims have been residing in Nepal since centuries, their mlechcha or impure status in the society (till as late as 1963), had greatly impaired their overall growth as a social group. The entire period of the Rana rule had relegated the Muslims to impure and inferior status in a rigidly hierarchic social structure, based on the Hindu four fold national caste system. The anti-Rana movement in 1950-51, which successfully reestablished the supremacy of Shah rulers, also promised democratisation of polity under the aegis of constitutional monarchy. Nepalese Muslims too had shown solidarity with the anti-Rana movement by associating themselves with major political organizations viz. Nepali Congress & the Communists. Their yearning for a democratic system was best


39 Ansari, n.33, pp. 37-38; Historian Rajesh Gautam has acknowledged their role in 1951 movement in his study, n.17, p.9.
evident when immediately after the overthrow of the Ranas, Muslims tried to organise themselves on a common platform (All Nepal Anjuman Islah) for the overall upliftment of their community.\footnote{In 1953, All Nepal Anjuman Islah was established under the presidency of Mr. Ahamaddin (who later became a king’s nominee in the legislative bodies - as the representative of Muslims) for social and economic upliftment of Muslim community.}

The first general election in 1959 saw many Muslims contesting, with the obvious purpose of participating in the democratically elected highest legislative body. Although none of them got elected, the community had one representative who was nominated by the king to the Upper House. But the Nepalese experience of popular government was a short lived phenomenon, as King Mahendra dismissed the Nepali Congress government in 1960, and introduced a partyless Panchayat system - solely to reinforce the absolute powers of monarchy. Soon after restoring his powers, King Mahendra enacted the new Legal Code in 1963. This latest code officially did away with the caste based discrimination prevalent in the public life.\footnote{Gaborieau, n.38.} Nevertheless, the renewal of the age-old power structure that vested supreme powers in the Hindu monarch, automatically implied that Hindu traditional ethos remained the basic guidelines for the society. Thereby leaving little scope for followers of other religions to flourish.

The Muslims who had just started getting induced by the democratic opportunities, found that the new system presented a dual social status for them. Constitutionally they gained 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 subsequently remained
deprived from political and economic benefits. Panchayat period thus saw the Muslims assuming a marginalised minority character. Though from time to time they have tried to organise themselves as religious groups, it was only to represent the cultural and religious aspirations of the community. The growth of religious group consciousness among the Nepalese Muslim's during the 30 long years of Panchayat rule had more or less remained chequered, however, since mid 70s there had been some attempts in organising the otherwise passive community by emphasising on their Islamic identity.

An organization called Muslim Seva Samiti was formed in 1974 with the basic purpose of disseminating Quronaic knowledge. It initially didn't have a wide support base especially among the Nepalese Muslims (viz. the Sufists), but gradually this concept gained ground as such organizations attracted funds from Arab countries for their zeal for Quranic way of life. Since the activities of such groups remained confined to cultural and religious lines devoid of political aspirations - the Panchayat regime didn't have much objection to their existence either. More so, because before the 1980 referendum, Muslim Seva Samiti had openly mobilised Muslim public opinion in favour of continuing the partyless panchayat system as against the popular movement for restoring multi-party democracy.

Ibid.

For origin and role of Muslim social organizations that came up during the Panchayat polity, see Ansari n.22, pp.29-32. Siddika, n.6, pp.235-37.

Receiving 'Zakat' money from Saudi Arabia, meant for the welfare of Muslim minorities all over the world, was always an important incentive for all the Muslim social organizations that came up.

Ansari, n.3, pp.33-34.
The pro-monarchy stand of the majority Muslim political elites, ensured certain economic and political benefits (such as nominations in legislative and other constitutional bodies) for themselves. The leadership on its part ensured that the community remain happy with the political status quo.\textsuperscript{46} However on the question of promoting common Nepali national identity, or the Nepalisation drive of the Panchayat regime, Muslims in Nepal began to air differences. In the later half of the 80's Islamisation drive by the Muslim social organization gained certain grounds in face of government sponsored acculturation and assimilation process.\textsuperscript{47} The rise in ethnicity and religious group consciousness among the Nepalese Muslims thus cannot be described as completely sudden phenomenon that occurred immediately after the establishment of multiparty democracy in 1990 - but rather as a natural consequence of a long suppressed desire for unrestrained social behaviour.

The post 1990 developments adequately indicate the Muslim dissatisfaction with their long existing status in society, and therefore they now want to pronounce their minority character - which is marked by a distinctly separate religious identity. The demand for a secular state and more freedom in matter of religion, during the drafting of 1990 constitution, although was made jointly by Buddhist, Muslims and Christian organizations along with \textit{the communists}\textsuperscript{48} - the very fact that the Muslim bodies had

\textsuperscript{46} The Muslim leadership felt that the community shouldn't vote against the monarch (i.e. His Panchayat government) as he is the best protector of community's interest in fact of any majoritarian (Hindu) dissent against the Muslim minorities.

\textsuperscript{47} More welfare organizations came up during 80's with the said purpose of 'impacting Islamic teachings to the community'. The most prominent among them was 'Islamic Yuva Sangh' (Islamic Youth Organisation) in 1986.

joined the movement in itself was a major step forward for a hitherto submissive community. The most discernable change in the affirmation of Muslim ethnicity in the post 1990 scenario however is, that for the first time they have become more conspicuous about their presence. The election of 6 Muslim MPs immediately after the establishment of multiparty democracy in 1991 has underlined their aspiration for contending for democratic space in the society. The mushrooming of Muslim social organisations and voluntary associations as a swift response to the constitutional change (1990), is also indicative of new-found confidence of the Muslim community.

With the modernisation of communication and more importantly introduction of electoral politics, the existing Hill-Terai divide among the Nepalese Muslims is gradually eroding too. Common religious identity is fast becoming a potential symbol for group mobilisation. Increasing social interactions between the hill and Terai Muslims (viz. solemnising marital ties) notwithstanding cultural differences are actually helping the community to come closer as a single religious community.

Islamisation of liberal Muslims in urging them to follow Quranic way of life has also become an important agenda for a few organizations and madarsas. Fundamentalist organizations like Islamic Yuva Sangh which seeks to "convey the correct message of Islam" and strive for Islamic way of life can now operate in more open and legitimate manner. Although such organizations haven't had much impact on the liberal hill Muslims of the Sufi school, but are gradually having some influences on the Terai Muslims, who because of their close proximity to the large Muslim population across the border in north India - follow a more conservative Islamic way of life.
How far this Islamisation trend has contributed to the growth of Muslim ethnicity in Nepal, would be analysed in the next chapter which concentrates on the Terai or Madhesi Muslims — as they are popularly known.