CHAPTER VI

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Nepal’s recent transformation from an absolute monarchy to a participatory democracy based on popular sovereignty, has also ushered in the challenges that are inevitable for any transitional society. Hence the onset of political modernisation process has unfolded the ordained conflict between the assimilationist thrust of the Nepalese state, (that had all along pursued a policy of national integration with the central theme of ‘Hinduisation, Sanskritisation and Nepalisation’), and the heterogenous pulls of its diverse and pluralistic pattern of society.

In this changing context, the old model of integration is no longer having an undisputed acceptance among its varied population. As various ethnic groups feel that the model was essentially designed by the Hindu King and his coterie of upper caste hill Hindu elites (Bahuns & Chetris), who tried to contain pluralism within a framework - dominated by values and orientations of Brahminic culture. In other words the decentering pulls on such monolithic notion of national integration is bringing to the fore the fluid boundaries of the existing Nepali nation, and the problems of modernising a traditional polity. As the new system with its old elite base (who continue to dominate due to its advantageous social and educational position) finds it difficult to adapt to the concept of wider participation of the hitherto peripheral groups in society.

The emergence of ethnic, caste, region and religion based pressure groups and political parties, such as Nepal Janajati Mahasangh (a conglomeration of 22 non caste mongoloid ethnic groups), Nepal Buddhist Association, All Nepal Muslim Ettehad Sangh,
Sadbhawana Party, Rashtriya Jana Mukti Morcha - in the past few years with their demands ranging from local autonomy to federalism to secular state; can be seen in the light of the changing pattern of group behaviour in the transforming political systems [traditional to modern (Gellner)]. As in highly structured traditional societies (the four-fold caste hierarchy in the case of Nepal) each member had a known position and role in society, usually acquired by birth. Thus a person’s own culture (language, religion and race) mattered little. Whereas in modern societies which are less structured, an individual’s position usually depends upon his achievements. However, the diffusion of the former rigid structure is usually accompanied by the imposition of the culture of the dominant group (to maintain the homogeneity of the nation) with which the subordinate groups are expected to assimilate themselves. In such situations it is natural that the subordinate groups tend to preserve their own identity by falling back upon their own culture and expressing political loyalties accordingly.

The predicament of Nepalese Muslims is of similar nature in the post 1990 Nepal. In the backdrop of ethnic identity assertion against the homogenising and assimilationist nation building approach of the Bahun-Chetri ruling elites, Muslim citizens of both hill & plains origin (after years of subjugation and abiding by its defined role in a hierarchic social structure), have also begun to organise themselves on the basis of their common religious identity. The mobilisation of Nepalese Muslims along the religious lines, assumes legitimacy as it is primarily aimed at claiming equal status, rights and opportunities as equal citizens of the state (which though described by the new democratic constitution as multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country but in reality identifies mainly with the dominant Hindu culture). Hence the manipulation of the symbol of Islamic religion by the Muslims
of Nepal to project themselves as religious minority groups, can be described as 'positive communalism' - a term used by Rajni Kothari for describing the consciousness of common identity of a group of people, essentially based on their cultural heritage (religion, language, region etc) and 'not on (their) exclusive identity that denies respect for other identities and propagates unity by means of subjugating others.

The religious distinctness has thus well served the purpose of the Nepalese Muslim elites in bringing internal cohesion within an otherwise dispersed community, and this single cultural marker has helped the Muslims to differentiate themselves from the rest of the population. In terms of common territorial history; language; and lifestyle – we otherwise find little commonalities within the Muslim population of Nepal, as the Teraian, Hill, and Kathmandu (Kashmiri) Muslims do not share any of the aforesaid ethnic markers. The common Islamic identity is therefore playing an increasingly effective role, in uniting Muslims from different demographic groups in the present transitional phase of Nepali society and politics.

The raised religious profile of the community, and the growing consciousness about their religious minority status is thus not a sudden phenomenon. It substantiates the argument that even though the members of peripheral ethnic and religious groups in the initial stages of modernising pre-industrial societies, usually remain a relatively unmobilised rural mass, (occupying lower caste/class positions), they however gradually get mobilized with the process of modernisation. Improved transportation and communication in Nepal has helped diverse, isolated groups to come closer than ever before, and in the process realise the glaring disparities that exist in the arena of social justice among various ethnic groups. Moreover, as pointed out in the first chapter, from
the sociological point of view the concept of minority is mainly derived from the dominant-subordinate relationship, characterised by discrimination, prejudice and exclusion practised by the former, and self-segregation by the latter. Thus the Muslim community which had been discriminated all along by the Hindu state and its monolithic culture, has begun to rally around its religious identity for restructuring the hitherto existing relation of domination and discrimination.

Such minority perception becomes more embedded in the event of persistence of the continued dominance of traditional ruling castes in the socio-economic and political power structure. In Nepal, the persistence of traditional feudal relationships despite the political changes, is making the non-caste ethnic groups circumspect about the actual acceptance of culturally plural character of the Nepali nation by the state. As the various Janajati groups make it clear that as long as the Bahun & Chetri ruling elites of democratic Nepal insist that Nepal is a 'nation' and not nation in the making, it would only mean that the present Nepali nation is only the nation of the Hindus, and all those 'non-caste' ethnic groups who do not conform to the model of Nepali nationalism i.e. the Parbatiya Hindu culture, would continue to remain as subordinate groups in the Nepali society. Thus along with the other Janajati groups, in their demands for their cultural rights, the Muslims too are trying to resist the prevailing majoritarianism of the Hindus who, in the name of the majority population, actually impose the Hill upper caste (representing around 32% of the total population) culture, emulated by the lower castes and the non-caste, Mongoloid tribes, over the last two centuries of Gorkha rule as a part of its Sanskritisation and acculturation process.
The demand for introducing 'Urdu' in the school (Terai) curriculum and broadcasting of Urdu news from Radio Nepal for the Muslims - is a sign of such assertion of cultural rights by the Muslims. It also signifies the use of the symbol Urdu language by the Muslim elites (both religious and political) to establish Urdu as an additional mark of Muslim cultural identity, and separate themselves from the Hindu Madhesiya population in the Terai and from the rest of social groups in the hills. Otherwise, in lieu of sharing the cultural aspects with the local population – such as sharing the mother tongue viz. Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Maithili by the Muslims of western central, and eastern regions of the Terai respectively; and Nepali by the Muslims of western hill districts of Syangja, Tanahu, Kaski and Gorkha, their claim for separate group identity, distinct from the rest of the population might get overlooked by the state while recognising the varied cultural rights of its people.

The other major demands of the Muslims are also aimed at protecting their separate religious identity. The common concerns about the establishment of permanent Haj committee office at the Home Ministry under the patronage of the government; government recognition of Islamic religious education given at Madarasas and Maqtabs and above all declaring public holidays for Islamic religious festivals (Id and Moharram), shows that Islamic symbols are essential for the Nepalese Muslims to establish their existence as religious minority community in a Hindu country. Religion therefore is the all encompassing cultural marker for the dispersed Muslim community of Nepal. It helps the community to organise themselves as a social group and claim their share from the state, which acknowledges the plurality of its population, and also grants the constitutional right
to every community to conserve and promote its language, script and culture; and the freedom to profess and practice its own religion (Article 18 and 19 of 1990 constitution).

However, the mobilisation of the community, solely on the basis of its faith also runs the risk of reducing the Muslim identity formation (in Nepal) into acts of competition between its religious and political elites, in gaining control of power. Both the religious and political elites of the Muslim community would like to use unifying symbols of Islam most effectively. The ethnic mobilizations of other subcontinental Muslims (viz. in India and Srilanka) have also shown that Islamic symbols' unifying power has often been used by the Muslim elites to have a competitive advantage against their rivals in other communities and that it has also proved to be the most effective means of achieving political power.

For instance, when seen in the context of ‘Pahade – Madhesi’ conflict, it is found that irrespective of the religious differences, Hindus and Muslims of Terai have remained united in their struggle against the ‘Pahade’ dominated administrative machinery, and its discriminatory attitude towards the plains people. But the growing mobilization of the Muslims along the line of pure Islamic identity has slowly started polarising the Muslims against the Hindus in the name of maintaining an independent identity (for the Muslims). Here lies the significance of the role of the influential class of Muslim clergy and a section of conservatives – who intend to make their drive for Islamisation synonymous with the rise of Muslim group identity in Nepal. This does indicate the tendency among the emerging Muslim religious elites in Nepal to expand their sphere of influence by exercising an effective control over the network of Islamic educational institutions. Such efforts on part of the religious elites, though in its initial stages, carries the risk of isolating the
Muslims from the rest of the population in Nepal. Moreover, the stress on the sole use of 'Islamic puritanism' to unify the Muslims is also aimed at establishing and preserving the religious and legal authority of the 'Ulemas' over the community.

Meanwhile the common Islamic identity, along with improvement in transportation and communication and introduction of electoral politics, has certainly played a crucial role in narrowing down the Hill-Terai divide among the Nepalese Muslims. The less puritanical and liberal Hill Muslims belonging to the Barelvi (sufi) school of Islam are however, making the puritans (the Deobandis of Terai) feel concerned about the 'non-Quranic' way of life of their hill counterparts. Hence for some fundamentalist organizations (Al Hira Educational Society of Nepal, Islamic Yuva Sangh) and centres for Islamic educations in Terai (viz in Bhutaha, Krishnanagar, and Nepalgunj) it has become an important agenda to Islamise (what they perceive), the 'ignorant' hill Muslims, to make them follow a more Quranic way of life. It can be pointed out here that in a transitional society and a state of fledgling democracy as that of Nepal - symbols of Islamic group identity which gives the Muslims the status of minority community in Nepal, must not be expropriated by the forces of religious fundamentalism. As their influence would only be detrimental to the cause of Muslim identity formation — by alienating the community and making them vulnerable to the backlash of Hindu fundamentalism.

In the given situation, the newly emerged Muslim political elites are expected to play a crucial role in the identity formation of the Muslim religious minority in a multi-ethnic but Hindu religious state of Nepal. While the Muslim leadership in Nepal is bound to use the Islamic symbols to unite the Muslim population of Nepal, to affirm the existence of a subordinate Muslim community in the country, so that the democratic state while
acknowledging their religious minority status, must allow the Muslims to preserve their
distinguishable religious and cultural features. It is also essential on the part of the
leadership to restrain the moves by the Muslim religious elites from defining the
community on the basis of strict adherence to the Islamic scriptures. The few incidents of
communal conflicts in the post 1990 Nepal indicate that communal polarisations are more
sharp in those areas of Terai where both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists are in
competitive strength. In such cases the state (which has just embarked upon representative
democracy but still identified with the majority religion) too, reacts cautiously. Analysing
the overall change in Muslim group behaviour, it has been however observed in the
foregoing chapters (Chap.-III-IV) that ‘Identity Assimilation’ and ‘Identity Affirmation’
have broadly remained the two major trends in the Muslim minority behaviour since the
end of the Rana autocracy in Nepal. While the former was associated with the closed
Panchayat system, the later trend coincided with the phases of liberalising political
environment.

The Nepalese state, therefore, like many in the third world countries, also finds
itself beset with the problems of creating a national society. Needless to say nation
building in Nepal has assumed a complex dimension ever since the system of representative
democracy replaced the absolute rule of monarchy in 1990. The prevalence of the age old
state policy of identifying Nepali nation with Hill Hinduism, monarchy, and Nepali
language nevertheless continued to present the modern Nepali state as a reincarnation of
old Hindu Himalayan Kingdom. It thus contained the pluralism in the society first through
the legal code and its all incorporative model of national caste system, and later with its
assimilationist model where the values and orientations of Parbatiya (Bahun Chetri)
culture dominated the framework of social integration. Ethnic cleavages therefore, couldn't become a serious threat to the existing model of national integration so far. But with the state's growing reliance on the various institutions of liberal representative democracy there is an emerging problem in reconciling the ideals of cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic homogeneity in the nation-state with the realities of ethnic and cultural pluralism. The growing consciousness about the civil and democratic rights among the non-caste Mongoloid ethnic groups (Janajatis); the Teraians' discontentment with the discrimination made against them by the Pahade (hill people) dominated state administration; and finally the non-Hindu populations' (Janajatis having their own Animist and tribal religious, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians) displeasure at the state's continued patronage to Hindu religion and its culture — further substantiate the growing dissonance between the modern Nepali state's definition of Nepali nation and the prevailing cultural diversities in the society.

Thus, in present day Nepal, rising movements in protest against the existing inequalities in the social realm is making the state increasingly vulnerable to experience the similar crisis in national integration faced by its other South Asian neighbours. These states, despite being plural societies have often tried to build nations on dominant sectarian identity, and in this process have alienated all its peripheral cultural groups. In the same manner, the persistence of the Nepalese state with its monolithic (overarching Hindu upper caste) identity, and its corresponding policy of integrating the socio-cultural pluralities in that monolithic framework of Hindu nation, inspite of the growing social and political movements (for effective assertion of identity of various other non-caste ethnic
and religious groups), certainly has all the potentials of getting Nepal embroiled into serious crisis of nation-building in the wake of impending ethnic discontentments.

It is by acknowledging that democratic Nepal is a nation in the making (and not a nation that is existing since the last two centuries), where social and political movements for the expansion of democratic and civil rights for the diverse groups of citizens, too, are involved in the nation building process. Or in other words, by discouraging the prevailing 'status quoism' in the social realm (with which the ruling Bahun-Chetri elites identify themselves), the fledgling democracy in this Himalayan Kingdom can still prevent the social and political mobilisation of populations from being taken over by the militant leadership (from the hands of the moderate elites) in order to launch a more virulent and even violent form of ethnic mobilization by effectively using the highly emotive symbols of ethnic, regional and religious group consciousness.