PREFACE

The accommodation of ethnic and religious minorities continues to be a formidable task for the states in South Asian society. It is largely because the states in this region are yet to reconcile the plurality of population, with their strategies of nation building - adopted over the last 50 years as a direct or indirect fallout of the end of colonial rule in the region.

In pursuance of state-centric integrationist models of nation building to create a homogeneous nation society, states in South Asia have either acquired a theocratic or a majoritarian cultural character - by often aligning with the dominant cultural-religious identity prevailing in the society. Hence those groups which do not conform with that dominant identity adopted by the state, essentially acquire the minority or subordinate status in the society, and are usually sought to be subjugated, pacified or transformed through the symbolism of majoritarian culture.

The growing assertion of ethnic and communal identity in these multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, is thus a logical corollary to the existing models of nation building and cultural policies being followed in the region. It must be noted here that mobilisation of people along the lines of their ethnic and religious identities is more widespread in those underdeveloped and highly pluralist third world countries, where the onset of political modernisation has made the democratic rights and freedom as the proclaimed social ideal, while discrimination and inequalities among social groups are what modernisation and development have actually resulted in. The differential distribution of state resources and valued employment opportunities among the ethnic groups have
evoked group consciousness on religious, linguistic, caste and regional lines - with the effective manipulation of these symbols of identity by the representative elites.

The present study attempts to analyse the ethnicisation of the Muslim minority community in the Hindu state of Nepal; and how the practice of monolithic statecraft by the ruling elites, even after the establishment of democratic policy has politicised the Muslim group identity over the recent years. As monarchy remained the linchpin of Nepalese polity for more than two centuries, and had traditionally and institutionally symbolised the fusion of state with nation - the subject culture in a patrimonial mould of polity therefore did not allow the ethnic cleavages to become a serious challenge to the state. However, with the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990, not only the heterogenous cultural tradition of Nepali society has come out in open, today, the stress is more on ethnic differences rather than on the similarity.

Thus, the transformation of absolute monarchy into a representative system of government; the ethnic dimension of the new power structure; and the policies and strategies adopted by the ruling elites to cope with the urges and aspirations of various groups, provide a good setting for understanding the accommodation of the Muslim minority in a multicultural but predominantly Hindu society of Nepal. In this respect this study puts forward the following hypotheses that modernisation of traditional societies brings changes in the pattern of group behaviour and induces ethnic and communal group mobilisation for claiming their democratic share in power and authority. And secondly, the elite entry is essential for any group mobilisation. As effective interpretation, reinterpretation and manipulation of symbols of group identity by the leadership are
critical for any kind of ethnic group mobilisation.

In the first chapter, while providing a theoretical understanding of the terms 'minority' and 'plural society', the study proposes a broad appraisal of various approaches of state policies in culturally plural societies. It also analyses the response of the minorities especially towards the homogenising state policies; which is followed by a discussion on the development of ethnic identity formation among the Muslim minorities in South Asian societies.

The second chapter presents an overview of the pluralistic mosaic of Nepali society that helps us in understanding the growing assertion of identity by the diverse cultural and religious groups in the present day democratic Nepal, as against the homogenising thrusts in nation-building policies that are still pursued by the ruling elites in Nepal.

An account of the historical evolution of Muslim minorities as a distinct social group in the kingdom of Nepal is presented in the third chapter. While chapter four concentrates on the gradual development of Muslim ethnicity in the Terai region of Nepal - which has the largest concentration of Muslims in country. It also studies the changing nature of Muslim group behaviour and role of the Muslim leadership in affirming their Islamic identity along with the changes in political climate of the country.

An analysis of state policies and its impact on Muslim minorities is presented in fifth chapter. Besides studying the political participation of the Muslims, it also traces the growth of Muslim groups mobilisation in the context of political change and elucidates the
response of the Nepalese state vis-a-vis the identity assertion by the Muslim in the post 1990 Nepal.

Finally, the concluding chapter comments on the evolution of Muslim minority identity in the light of the ongoing process of political modernisation in a traditional society; and makes observations on the emerging competition within the Muslim elites - political and religious, for gaining effective control over the community and achieving political power through its representation.