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Muslims of Nepal's Terai

The Muslim minority of Nepal, especially of the Terai region, faces a dilemma. The Muslims no longer wish to accept their inferior status in society. But as soon as they articulate their identity, they invite on themselves the attention and hostility of Hindu fundamentalists.

MOLLIKA DASTIDER

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, gives Muslims a distinct identity in a predominantly Hindu-Buddhist set-up. According to the 1991 census report, the 6,53,218 Muslims in Nepal comprise 3.5 per cent of the total population. Nevertheless, they form the second largest religious minority group, next only to the Buddhists (7.78 per cent in 1991).

The 1991 census data, which for the first time listed 64 ethnic and caste groups, is, however, termed misleading by most of these ethnic/caste groups. 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 per cent of the total population [CBS 1993a, 1995a].¹

The Muslim population in Nepal is quite dispersed, and mainly concentrated in the outlying areas along the Indian border. 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 [CBS 1993b].

The Region

The narrow plain strip of land of the Terai belt starts from the foothills of Siwalik range of the Himalayas and stretches up to the Gangetic plains of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India. For this geographical region the word 'Terai' is used interchangeably with 'Madhes' which is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Madhyadesh', meaning the mid-country between the foothills of the Himalayan mountains in the north and Vindhya mountains in the south. People living in this region are therefore described as Madhesis or Madhesiyas [Jha 1993]. In this study, the word 'Terai',

however, only refers to the plain strip of land lying within the southern boundary of Nepal, i.e., the Terai region that exclusively belongs to Nepal.

The Terai area of Nepal has its own share of multiple ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural groups of people. Among them Tharus are numerically the largest and historically the oldest indigenous people of the area. The Gorkha rulers' policy on encouraging new settlements in Terai ever since its unification (in 1768), and later on followed by the Ranas during their rule till 1950, had greatly influenced the demography of Nepal. The beginning of settlement of people of 'Indian origin' is thus inseparably linked with the history of settlements in Terai.

A sizeable increase in the population of Indian origin occurred when the British government returned the territories of far-western Terai to Nepal (which were taken away by them during the Anglo-Nepali War of 1814-16), as a goodwill gesture to the Ranas, who had provided military assistance to the British to suppress the Indian Mutiny in 1857-58. The restoration of Terai districts like Banke, Bardia, Kailali and Kanchanpur by the British to Nepal increased the number of Muslims in the western Terai, as these districts already had a sizeable Muslim population before integration into Nepal.

Also during this period, the bordering areas of mid-western district of Kapilbastu saw the settlement of big Muslim landlords from Awadh region, as they were invited by the Ranas for their zamindari skills. They were given vast areas of forested lands at nominal rates for maximising agricultural production and revenues from the lands.²

Muslims in Terai constitute 3.28 per cent out of their total 3.53 per cent representation in the whole of Nepal. Among the Terai caste/ethnic groups, they form the third largest group, coming only after the Tharus (6.46 per cent) and Yadavs (4.01 per cent). Thus the Muslim population in Nepal is predominantly of Madhesi

origin as around 97 per cent of the total Muslims in Nepal reside in the plains of Terai [Ansari 1981b; Siddiq 1993].

According to the figures given in the *Statistical Year Book of Nepal* (1995), the highest number of Muslims are found in the central Terai district of Rautahat (71,379), followed by the western district of Kapilbastu (62,512), and then again by the central districts of Mahottari (53,852) and Bara (48,648). The next Terai district, which is famous for its Muslim population, is the mid-western district of Banke (45,787). The growing significance of Muslim presence in the Terai districts has been rightly underlined in a recent study by Harka Gurung, where he has pointed out that Muslims, in fact, constitute the single largest social group in the districts of Parsa, Rautahat, Kapilbastu and Banke [CBS 1995b].³

The other conclusion drawn from the census data is that while the central districts of Terai record the highest concentration of Muslims, there has been a substantial increase in Muslim presence in the eastern region of Terai, i.e., the region bordering Darbhanga, Saharsa and Purnea districts of Bihar. The districts on the Nepali side and the population of Muslims there are Morang (26,987), Sunsari (45,737), Saptari (35,020) and Siraha (32,116) [Yadav 1992].

In one of the CNAS studies, Bista attributes the population increase to the latest arrival of Bihari Muslims and caste Hindus from across the border into the Nepal Terai [Bista 1985]. There are also reports of alleged infiltration of Bihari (Muslims) refugees from Bangladesh, who entered the eastern Terai region of Nepal in the post-1971 period [Sharma 1994].⁴ However, due to lack of adequate data on such infiltrations, it is difficult to confirm such reports.

Like their Hindu counterparts, Terai Muslims too have strong social ties across the border and receive cultural sustenance from the larger Muslim population of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

As for the legal status of the Muslims as a religious minority group, the Legal Code of 1963 (the present code) which abolished caste based social stratification, guarantees equal rights and opportunities for all people of Nepal, regardless of ethnic origins and faith. Accordingly, Muslims of Nepal are free to practise their customs and have been treated as an integral part of Nepalese society. They are also free to engage in religious activities and build mosques.⁵ While Muslim traditional

marriage (nikah) is recognised by law, the traditional divorce known as 'talaq' is not so recognised.

Nepal being a Hindu state, the legal provisions there naturally allow Hindu customs and tradition, in contrast to other religions, feels Hamid Ansari, a Nepali Muslim scholar. He points out that though Muslims have readily accepted the laws of the land that prohibit proselytism and ban cow slaughter and in the hills have even got assimilated with the local traditions and customs, their position in the society has not changed much [Ansari 1981a]. The introduction of the new legal code (1963) may have officially ended the discriminatory caste based provisions that existed in 1853 and 1952 codes, but in practice the 'mlechha' or impure rank of the Muslims still dominate the minds of the Hindus, and is reflected in their social behaviour towards Muslims.

Nepali Muslim scholars maintain that mere legal provisions do not ensure religious freedom for minorities. Taking advantage of the Hindu character of the state, vested interest groups belonging to the majority community have been successful in intimidating Muslims whenever they have tried to practise their religious freedom (which allows them to perform all acts considered as duty in their own religion) by building mosques, madrasas or graveyards.⁶

As regards their economic status, like other Indian settlers, Muslims too entered Terai as farmers, and a majority of them continue to remain linked with agriculture. The lack of proper statistics does not enable us to estimate landholdings of Muslims and their role in agriculture. However, independent surveys like that by the author, reveal that all over Terai villages in districts such as Jhapa in the east, Bara in the central and Kapilbastu in the west, Muslim occupational castes, viz, Hajjam (barber), Darzi (tailor), Rajmistry (mason) and Julaha (weaver), all work in the fields during the harvesting season, either on their own lands or as tenant farmers. Inadequate income opportunities in their hereditary profession have forced many occupational castes to fall upon tenant farming or even work as daily wage labourers in bigger farms usually at four kilograms of rice per day.⁷

In the few urban centres in Terai, Muslims are however conspicuous in small-scale trade. In the towns of middle and western Terai (viz, Birgunj, Kalaiya, Tauliwa, Krishnanagar, Nepalgunj and

Mahendranagar), Muslims form a significant part of the small traders. As for Nepalgunj, due to historical reasons, Eklaini Bazaar, the main trading centre, is dominated by Muslim shopowners who are the direct descendants of the original traders, who were invited by Rana rulers around 1860-75 from the Awadh region (Nandpara) to establish a trading centre along the Indo-Nepal border. Nepalgunj is the only place in the whole of Nepal where Muslim traders are found in substantial numbers [for a more exhaustive study see Sharma nd].

Barring the few shopkeepers and small traders and even fewer landlords, the overall economic condition of the Terai Muslims has remained one of impoverishment. The economic status of the Muslims in Terai matches their inferior social status. A caste based hierarchic social structure is inevitably linked with feudal land relations where low caste people usually constitute the lowest economic strata and have little or no influence on the society and economy of that country.

From Alienation to Affirmation?

Muslims in Terai not only account for 12-13 per cent of the total Terai population, they also constitute the third largest caste/ethnic group among the Terai social groups (3.28 per cent, coming only after the Tharus and Yadavs). Hence, the strength of the Muslims in the region is giving the community a new feeling of group identity in the present set-up of pluralist polity, which acknowledges the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Nepali society. The political transformation from absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy is slowly but surely having some effect on the peripheral and religious minority groups like the Muslims.

It must, however, be emphasised here that the community's gradual affirmation of a separate identity is not an easy task. Since the beginning of their settlement in Terai, Muslims have always kept a very low profile, and have quietly accepted their low caste rank in the social hierarchy, assigned to them on account of being outside the Hindu religion. It must be remembered that the post-unification history of Nepal has been a history of assimilation process or a drive for Hinduisation under the aegis of Hindu monarchy.

Muslims were not only relegated to an inferior rank in the caste hierarchy, they were even considered as 'bidharmi' (irre-

ligious) for being 'bideshi' (foreigner) by the state enacted legal codes (for example, Code of 1935, vol 5: 15-16 and 29 and Code of 1963: 223). In general usage, Islam was further derogated as 'Ulto (wrong) Dharma' [Gaborieau 1972:92-93]. With this religious and social status in a traditional society and an authoritative hierarchy, Muslims in Nepal had no option other than accepting a low and subordinate position.

In the post-1990 Nepal, Madhesi Muslims have accepted the establishment of popular democracy with a mixture of hope and apprehension. While welcoming the newly acquired democratic freedoms, the Muslims in Terai are also concerned about the fallout of majority rule on the community. They feel that political parties would only be interested in the majority voters, who would bring them to power, and these parties would therefore be biased while dealing with Hindu-Muslim conflict situations.

This apprehension is precisely the reason why the Muslim Madhesi, in spite of their good strength in many of the Terai districts, are not organising themselves on a single platform, to press for their socio-economic demands or in adopting a policy of self-assertion.

Nevertheless, the process of organising the entire Muslim population in Nepal has so far been initiated by Terai Muslims only, albeit with divergent interests and with a different political colour. The shift in the nature and character of Muslim bodies in post-1990 Nepal is discernible as they attempt to focus on the socio-economic and socio-political aspects of the problems faced by Muslims in democratic Nepal. Muslim organisations that functioned in the predemocratic era existed solely for religious and cultural purposes, as permitted by the monarchy-led panchayat regime, and were therefore not actually working for the upliftment of poor Muslims. Many of the organisations in Terai even existed only on paper with the prime motive of receiving donation ('zakat' money) from the Gulf. These organisations never antagonised the Hindu rulers with their demands and conformed to the low-profile and non-assertive image of the community (for a list of Muslim welfare organisations, see Siddiqua 1993:275-79).

If the liberal political atmosphere with guaranteed democratic freedom has brought the long suppressed Muslim ethnicity to the foreground, the prevalence of Deobandi school of thought for a more

Quranic way of life has also made the identity assertion among the Muslims synonymous with assertion of 'Islamic identity'. This involves strict adherence to the puritanical rituals and practices of Islam. Mushrooming of more than a dozen Muslim religious and welfare organisations immediately after the establishment of democracy in 1990 indicates a heightened religious profile of the Muslims in the country.

Are They United with the Hindus in the Hill Terai Divide?

Ever since the unification of Nepal, inhabitants of the Terai or the Madhesiyas have been discriminated against—socially, economically and politically by the ruling elites of the Hills [Baral 1990]. In the Hill-Terai divide, with complete domination of the Hill people and their culture in every sphere of life, Muslims and Hindus identify with the Terai and possess a common Madhesi identity. However, added to the plains identity, the religious identity of the Muslims puts them, even lower on the social hierarchy. But it is mostly found that despite the religious differences Muslims do identify with the Hindus as Madhesis, against any kind of Hill domination.

Opinions do differ, and it is being pointed out that the common 'madhesi' identity is only at the broader level, as on the religious ground both the groups strictly maintain a separate religious identity.⁸ One section among Muslim intellectuals itself believes that because of their vulnerable position in society, Muslims have (during the panchayat rule) by and large remained loyal to the ruling party and 'pro-system' as it ensured physical and moral security provided by the Hindu rulers.⁹

Reflecting the Terai Muslim sentiment, RPP leader Mohammed Mohsin observes that in effect, Terai Muslims are the fourth class citizens since they do not belong to any of the three dominant social classes of the Nepali society and politics, viz, Bahun-Chettri-Newar ruling elite, Hill Hindus (i.e., the other Hindu castes of the Hills), and upper caste Hindus of Terai.¹⁰ Notwithstanding this inferiority feeling, the overall relationship between the Hindus and Muslims has largely remained tension free as the Muslims have been reconciled to their subservient status in society.

It must, however, be maintained that the growing proliferation of fundamentalists both within Muslim and Hindu communities, (viz, Vishwa Hindu Sangh (VHS), Shiv Sena, Islamic Yuva Sangh (IYS), Muslim Ekta Sangh (MES)) and their

respective organisational activities in the recent past, have succeeded in creating a rift between the two. The rise and growth of Hindu militant bodies like Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal in the urban centres of Nepalgunj and Birgunj (Parsa) in the aftermath of the Ayodhya incident in 1992, and their increasing support base among the Hindu traders in these towns have polarised the Muslim and the Hindu Madhesis of these towns.

Hindu-Muslim polarisation is more sharp in the western Terai town of Nepalgunj, where both the communities are mostly involved in trade and Muslims are economically stronger than in any other parts of the Terai. The competitive strength of Muslims (as against the Hindus) has made the situation more volatile ever since the Hindu organisation VHS took up the Ayodhya issue for garnering support in this communally sensitive town.¹¹

However, this change is essentially an urban phenomenon, as the activities of Hindu fundamentalist organisations are mostly urban-based and their support base usually consists of trading communities (viz, Marwaris) in the towns of Terai. Muslims in such places easily come under the influence of Saudi funded Islamic puritans and are seen to be disassociating themselves from Hindu Madhesis.

In rural Terai, there is no such polarisation of identity. The rural poor (mostly agricultural labourers) consist of both Hindus and Muslims. The administrative

apathy and the discriminations that they face in their interaction with the panchayat and district level officials, unites them as Madhesis.

The growing number of Islamic fundamentalist groups in Terai is widely perceived as a measure of the success of the Pakistani Intelligence agency ISI in establishing a base for themselves among the Muslim population of the region. The most common allegation (of the Indian government) against these groups is that they are assisting and abetting anti-Indian activities while operating from their bases on the Nepalese side of the open Indo-Nepal border (i.e., all along the Terai region).¹²

It is easy to smuggle contraband into Indian territory through the 500 miles long open international border. There is misuse of the open border by third country nationals to carry out subversive activities in north India, and in providing material support to the secessionist groups of Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and even north-eastern provinces of India.¹³ Nevertheless, to suspect the entire Terai Muslim population of being party to such activities would be wrong.

In such intrigues very few locals are actually involved. There could be some cases of Muslim youth being lured by money by agents of subversive organisations. These men are also convinced that they would be furthering the cause of Islam by helping the Muslim militants in Kashmir. Some Terai Muslim leaders, like

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Salim Ansari, admit to such possibilities. According to them, the socio-economic backwardness of the Muslim minorities is largely responsible for such misguided activities of Muslim youth in the region. Some educated unemployed youth can easily be instigated and can become a tool in the hands of trans-border conspirators in exchange for some lucrative offers like jobs or scholarships in the Gulf.¹⁴

The installation of multi-party democracy in Nepal in 1990 has undoubtedly paved the way for pluralism and pressure group politics in an essentially multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious country. Religious minorities like the Muslims, in a Hindu dominated state system, find themselves in an ambiguous position of hope and apprehension. On the one hand, if they have affirmed their Islamic identity and have also organised themselves under interest groups (meant for promoting Muslim interests), at the same time their religious profile is also making them vulnerable to the antagonistic Hindu pressure groups.

The few incidents of communal clashes between the Hindus and Muslims, that have so far been reported (since 1990) from Tulsipur (Dang) in 1992, and Nepalgunj (Banke) in December 1994 and October 1995, confirm the belief that Muslims are safe in Nepal as long as they maintain their age-old submissive and non-assertive minority character. But as soon as they become a little assertive and aware about their democratic rights, they immediately attract the ire of the Hindu majority, and animosity and mutual distrust displace the harmonious relationship between the two communities.

Thus there is an imperative need for the political leadership in Nepal today to pay heed to moderate Muslim demands such as (a) greater access to modern education; (b) better representation in state apparatus; (c) alleviating poverty among the rural Muslims of Terai who constitute the majority of Nepal's Muslim community; and (d) declaring Muslim festivals like Eid and Moharram as public holidays. These steps would prevent further alienation of the Muslims. More importantly this would ensure that the Muslim leadership does not pass into the hands of fundamentalists.

While conceding to the legitimate demands of the moderates, the democratic state of Nepal should by all means check the rise of any kind of fundamentalism (both Hindu and Islamic), as they both have the potential to fan either majority

or minority communalism, in the communally sensitive Terai region. ■■■

Notes

- 1 The basic premise of this belief emanates from a report in the official daily *Gorkhapatra* (5th Baisakh, 2038 BS) which published the total figure of Nepalese Muslim population as 1.4 million, during the visit of Saudi foreign minister in February 1981. Doubts have been expressed about the accuracy of census figures by many prominent Nepali scholars, see Kausakar (1989); Bhattachan (1995); Gautam (nd).
- 2 Koder Betwa village near Krishnanagar (Kapilbastu district) has the distinction of having only big Muslim landlords – Abdul Waheb Khan is one of them, who now owns only 28 bighas (as permissible under Nepal Land Reform Act of 1964), while his ancestor was initially given 600 bighas of forested land at a very nominal price by the then Rana ruler at the end of the 19th century (narrated to the author by Abdul Waheb Khan).
- 3 Based on these same figures of 1991 census, the well known Nepali geographer and social demographer Harka Gurung has identified three major ethnic and caste groups of all the 75 districts of Nepal in his study [Gurung 1994].
- 4 Also during a recent field study in easternmost district of Jhapa, the author has observed that a large part of the Muslim population in the district are migrant Muslim workers from the adjoining districts of Kishanganj and Galgalia in Bihar. While most of them have their names in the voters list, very few of them are citizens.
- 5 For the legal status of non-Hindus in the successive Legal Codes of 1853, 1952 and 1963, see Andras Hofer (1979) and Gaborieau (1972: n 23, pp 86-91).
- 6 General grievances of the Muslims, and their overall status in Nepal were recorded in 'Socio Economic Status of Muslims in Nepal', a working paper for Second National Muslim Conference, held in Kathmandu, August 18-19, 1996. Also refer Ansari (1981b: n 30).
- 7 As narrated by different occupational caste members such as Hajjam (barber), Darzi (tailor) and Dhuniya (cotton flufflers) of Bara Parsa (central Terai) and Kapilbastu districts (western Terai), as well as the landed gentry who employ these castes as daily wage labourers during their conversations with the author.
- 8 Views expressed by Abullaish, reader, CEDA, Tribhuvan University, in conversation with the author in May 1994.
- 9 Opinion of another Muslim lecturer, S M Habibullah of Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu.
- 10 RPP leader Mohd Mohsin's interviews with the author during May 1994 and December 1996.
- 11 The beginning of support mobilisation for building a Ram temple in Ayodhya (UP) in Nepalgunj, by Hindu organisations like Vishwa Hindu Sangh (since 1991), has sharply polarised the otherwise united (in their Terian identity) Hindu Muslim population of Nepalgunj (Banke).
- 12 This growing apprehension is expressed in various articles and reports over the past 5-6 years. For details refer Ashok K Mehta, 'Inside the Himalayan Kingdom', *Sunday*, New

Delhi, May 29-June 4, 1994, pp 22-27. Also refer to various newspaper reports, e.g. *The Hindustan Times*, January 4, 1994, New Delhi; *The Times of India*, March 25, 1995, New Delhi.

- 13 Seizure of huge amount of RDX explosives in Kathmandu from an alleged Kashmiri militant was reported in all major dailies of Kathmandu, viz. *The Kathmandu Post*, *The Rising Nepal*, *Gorkhapatra* in their December 17, 1996 issues.
- 14 Referring to this threat, RPP leader Mohd Mohsin says that such activities can be curbed only through joint initiatives by Indian and Nepali governments. India can reduce the influence of Islamic countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia by offering Nepalese Muslim youth the facilities to acquire higher education and technical expertise within India which would definitely reduce flow of Nepalese Muslims to other Islamic countries and hence help develop a positive attitude among them towards India.

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