

**THE MUSLIMS OF KATHMANDU:
A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN A
HINDU KINGDOM**

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Abstract

This is a study of religious identity in Kathmandu, Nepal. The aim is to establish the circumstances and conditions that define religious identity and the contexts in which it is expressed. Religious identity operates on various levels. At the macro-level, the Muslims are defined by the state as a marginal group. At the same time, the Hindu state has also shown itself to be tolerant of Muslims: the Hindu state not only intervened in communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims but also showed its support for Muslims at a time of crisis, which then affirmed the loyalty of the Muslims to the state. However, the acquiescent attitude of the Muslims towards the Hindus does not hide the subtle attempts to differentiate themselves from the Hindus, and their response and resistance to Islamic reform clearly show that their secular interests are closely linked to their religious ones. Finally, this thesis also shows that religious identity is changeable. It presents case studies of religious conversion from one religion to another, from one sect to another or from one level of commitment to another.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

When I was considering where to conduct fieldwork for my Ph.D. in anthropology, there were many who encouraged me to do my fieldwork in Singapore. My interest has always been in Muslim society, and in Singapore, there is no shortage of important issues to conduct research on. However, professionally, I felt that I needed to gain a fresh perspective on Muslim society. I was born and raised as a Muslim in Singapore, and I needed to first step out of that which has become familiar to me in order to reacquaint myself with it. The chance came in 1996 when I first visited Kathmandu, Nepal. The Muslims of Kathmandu are similar to those in Singapore in that they are both urban, religious minorities. But the one factor that convinced me to do research there was the fact that apart from our common faith, there was little that was familiar to me in Kathmandu. The discussions and arguments I had with my informants about our religious differences about what is, or is not Islamic, have led me to investigate the issue of religious identity. In challenging each other's markers of religious identity, my informants and I were, at the same time, defining our own, and it was through this process of exchange that the data in this thesis was produced.

The term 'religious identity' is used here as an analytical tool to explore the way that Muslims define themselves in their narratives about religious issues. 'Identity' is sometimes seen as a neutral replacement of the term 'ethnicity' which has become embedded in ideas about race and primordialism (Tonkin et al. 1989). However, Tonkin et al. (1989) warn that the problems with ethnicity come not from the term itself, but more with its use as a method of human naming and categorization; problems which they predict that the term 'identity' will share. Nevertheless, they suggest:

... two notions of the term 'identity': One more-or-less essentialist notion, with 'identity' as something (as attribute, entity, thing, whatever) which an individual or a group has in and of itself, and 'identity' that is subject to growth and decline, to health and sickness and another much like that of ethnicity... – a notion only existing in a context of oppositions and relativities. (Tonkin et al. 1989: 17)

The notion of identity as something that is evolving is particularly relevant to this thesis, which deals with the idea that identity is a shifting boundary. I am particularly interested in how Muslims define who they are, the types and significance of religious markers of identity, the contexts within which religious identity is defined and the extent to which religious identity is determined by social processes.

Apart from the work of Gaborieau (1977, 1982, 1984, 1993, 1995), Siddika (1993), Sharma (1994), Thapa (1995, 1998, 2000) and Dastider (1995, 2000), the Muslims of Nepal have been largely overlooked by South-Asian scholars. However, not only are the Muslims of Nepal relevant to the study of Islam in South-Asia, they occupy a particular niche in the literature. The Muslims of Nepal live in the only Hindu kingdom in the world, and for over a century, were ranked in a codified Hindu caste hierarchy. In this respect, the study of Muslims in Nepal provide an interesting counterpoint to that of the Muslims in India who are living under a secular constitution and whose relationship with the Hindu majority (in terms of caste) was not officially established. The work of Gaborieau (1977, 1982, 1984, 1993, 1995) is particularly relevant for the study of kinship, ritual and caste among Muslims in a Hindu environment. At the same time, the Muslims of Nepal are similar to those in other parts of the world in that they are not immune to the forces of Islamization or religious reform. However, way that they respond to these movements within the context of Nepal (see Chapter Seven) will be of interest to scholars of religious reform movements.

Methodology

My fieldwork was carried out in two stages. During the first stage, which is over a period of about two months, I stayed with three different Muslim families, and the data that was collected was during this period was derived mainly from participant-observation. The second stage, during which time I lived apart from the Muslims, the data was gathered through structured interviews which I personally conducted. I had a working knowledge of Nepali and knew a few words of Hindi/Urdu. In cases where the informants did not speak any

Nepali, I was often helped by others who acted as impromptu translators. The translation was often from Urdu or Tibetan into Nepali, but I also had cases whereby the translation was done from Urdu or Tibetan into English (the Nepalese often used me as an excuse to practice their English). However, most of the time, my Nepali was adequate to conduct interviews without the help of an interpreter.

I was introduced to my Muslim hosts by Deepak, a Buddhist goldsmith who lives in Kathmandu. When he found out that I wanted to do research on Muslims, he contacted some of his Muslim clients and asked them if they would mind having a Muslim researcher stay at their house. Not all were willing, but Deepak is a man of remarkable perseverance and he managed to convince a few of them to meet with me before deciding. When I arrived in Kathmandu, Deepak introduced me to these families. Deepak told everyone what a good Muslim I was; in particular, he mentioned that I had been observing the fast since I was seven, and that I could read the Quran in Arabic (these were Deepak's ideas of what constitutes a 'good Muslim', defined, no doubt, by his exposure to the Muslims in Kathmandu).

During those first meetings, my hosts regarded at me with what I could only interpret as uncertainty and doubt. Firstly, my physical features were similar to those of the Nepalese, and when I wore the *shalwar kameez*, it took Deepak some effort to convince them that I was Singaporean and not Nepalese. The fact that I spoke Nepali without a noticeable accent only made it more difficult for my hosts to see me as a foreigner. In most cases, people were unaware of my Muslim identity unless it was pointed out to them (and vice versa). Therefore, I cannot say that my Muslim identity was a passport to immediate acceptance; validation of my character came mainly from Deepak (himself a Buddhist) and it was mainly based on his persuasion that I was accepted by my hosts. In fact, Deepak's role in my research is not unlike Abu-Lughod's (1988) father in hers, only in my case, he is neither my father, nor a Muslim, but whose validation of my good character I needed nevertheless.

Prior to meeting my host families, Deepak had suggested that I stay with them for only a fortnight, so that both parties could decide on the suitability of

the arrangement. However, after I had stayed with the first family, I had to amend the two-week arrangement into a two-week rule. Despite the short period of time, my hosts regarded my departure as a personal rejection of their hospitality. I had to convince them that I would stay for a fortnight with all the families, not just theirs, thereby defining the temporal arrangement of the first part of my fieldwork.

To the wives of my hosts, I was always *bahini* (younger sister), but to the (male) hosts, I was called *chhori* (daughter). Their children, however, all called me *didi* (elder sister). The choice of terminology was indicative of my ambiguous position in the household. In terms of age, I was too old to be a daughter, but my position as an unmarried female compelled my male hosts to use terminology that defined a respectable distance¹ between us and reinforce their authority in the house. However, as the days went by, I realized that the terminology used was to describe an ideal relationship, not a working one. Because of my ambiguous position, I was not bound to the typical role accorded to daughters or sisters in Muslim families (cf. Abu Lughod 1988). I came and went as I pleased while my hosts kept a watchful but respectful distance, something that would not be possible had I truly been regarded as a sister or daughter.

Although my position of daughter/sister was not defined according to the control my hosts had over my movements, it was clearly manifest during feasts and festivals. For example, Eid, one of the main festivals for Muslims, was a logistical and gastronomic nightmare as I was obliged to visit and dine with all three families on the first day, which is usually celebrated among close relatives. Sometimes, my position in the family was more subtly expressed, like being scolded with the other children for eating too little at the dinner table, or being escorted to a wedding by my 'father' so that I would be properly introduced.

Initially, by assuming the status of sister/daughter, it meant that I had to surrender the control of my work to my 'fathers' and 'brothers', whom I totally

¹ Although the term '*bahini*' strictly means 'sister', is more commonly used to refer to any younger female, with no requirement of an actual kinship link. However, the use of the word is not the same as making a person a 'fictive kin', which would imply familial obligations and the observance of prohibitions on marriage. Because of this ambiguity in the meaning of the term '*bahini*', some men may have preferred to call me '*chhori*' to eliminate any possibility of an inappropriate relationship.

depended upon for introductions and advice. My 'fathers' and 'brothers' gladly took it upon themselves to plan whom I should talk to, whom I should not and which topics would be of interest. This arrangement only lasted for a few weeks – once my network broadened, I regained control of my research and my unequal relationship with my 'brothers' and 'fathers' began to change. As I began to know more people, my 'families' became a little more guarded in their conversations with me. Where once they were the centre of my social nexus, they felt that they are now merely a part of it.

As I became busier with my research, I also realized that my living arrangements had to change. Although I was not restricted in my movements in the daytime, my hosts did not approve of my night-time appointments. They were also not appreciative of the unpredictable nature of fieldwork, which often meant missed lunches at home or sudden, unexplained absences. So two months and three households later, I decided to live on my own. To create some distance between my informants and myself, I chose to rent rooms in non-Muslim houses, which raised a few eyebrows in the Muslim community. None of my families liked the fact that I was staying alone, much less in non-Muslim houses, but none of them imposed their views on me (or in some cases, I resisted obliging them). Gossip about my new living arrangements (which eventually came back to me through well-meaning informants) hinged on the fact that I have lived in London for a long time, and that I was used to 'freedom'. They were reflexive in their analysis of the situation, placing the blame on themselves and saying that it must have been their lifestyle that disagreed with me. My 'sisters' blamed the food they cooked and their lack of 'freedom' to accompany me to places, while my 'brothers' and 'fathers' mentioned the lack of hot water and a separate guestroom.

However, their main concern was that I would not be able to get *halal* (permissible in Islam) food, and to compensate for this, they insisted that I have my meals at their house (which I occasionally did). My hosts also made their presence felt in the second phase of my research by frequently calling me to check on how I was, to invite me for weddings and feasts and to remind me to drop by their house for a cup of tea. I was still their *bahini/chhori* and was

obliged to visit or else I would be *bepata* (lost) to them. In this way, our relationship continued throughout the rest of my fieldwork.

Compared to the first phase of fieldwork, where life was more or less limited within the household, the second phase of my fieldwork was more frantic, as my network of informants began to grow through personal contacts and recommendations. My interviews with my new informants were loosely structured around their households, their life history and their views on Kathmandu Muslim society. My strategy to stay with the different groups of Muslims seemed to have paid off. It provided me with a useful reference point when introducing myself to Muslims, and was an implicit validation of my Muslim identity.

However, my established Muslim identity made it difficult for me to ask questions that would jeopardize my religious standing with my informants. It was hard for me to get an informant to explain Muslim rituals such as prayers, weddings, circumcision and death; the assumption most informants made was that as a Muslim, I 'should know these things'. I also found it hard to distance myself from the rituals that my informants and I shared in common. By this I mean that I was very conscious of how easy it was to impose my own meaning and structure to ritual actions, especially when explanations are not forthcoming. This has a direct effect on the kind of data that I collected. Although I was a participant-observer in a few Muslim rituals, the data collected went little further than description, bereft as it was of the reflection and discussion that Bowen (1993) and Beatty (1999) were able to elicit from their informants.

Once my Muslim identity was established, my foreign identity became significant. The foreign Muslims that come to Kathmandu are usually wealthy donors from the Middle East, and some of my informants naturally thought that I was one of them. This had a profound effect on the kind of things that my informants wanted to talk about. For example, they wanted to know how I was going to help them get jobs for their children or how I was going to help raise money for their *madrasah* (religious school). Methodologically, this meant that the structured interviews that I had planned had to be changed to reflect the new issues and themes that were emerging from the interviews.

As these new issues were being raised, I felt myself being pushed into the role of advocate. One could argue that there was little else to justify my presence in Kathmandu; if I was not a donor or a potential employer, then I must be some kind of activist, someone who will ‘help Muslims’. But even as they forged a role for me to play, they had their doubts – this time I was quizzed not about my Muslim knowledge, but about who my sponsors were, what I am going to use the data for, which organization was going to publish my book. I answered their questions truthfully – I am mainly self-funded, I am writing a book for my studies, and I don’t know if I will publish my thesis – but there was the nagging feeling that what they wanted was for me to write for them, to “portray the *real* Islam”.

On a final note, I wish to point out that what I present in this thesis is the discourse of Muslims, of which religion is but one part. Alongside my structured interviews, my notebook is filled with the quotidian concerns of Muslims: the acute water shortages, the high price of onions, the overcrowded buses and the high cost of health care, none of which are related to religion, but which are shared by all the residents of Kathmandu. This reminds me of what Gilsenan cautioned in his book Recognizing Islam: “...we should be especially wary of assuming that it is Islam that is the most important area on which to focus. We do not have to accept or impose the primacy of religion over social, economic or political factors” (1992: 20). What I shall attempt to do in this thesis is to draw out the areas in which the Muslims affect, and are affected by, the Hindu environment in which they live.

The Setting

Nepal’s diverse population is as much a product of her unique geophysical features as it is her geographical location. Covering an area of 147,181 sq. Km,² Nepal can be divided into three ecological regions. The mountain zone, with an altitude between 4877 and 8848 meters above sea level, makes up 35% of the total land area of Nepal. At the same time, it is also the

² Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) 1995: 132

most sparsely populated belt, with only 7.8% of the total population.³ The Hill zone, which ranges between 610 and 4877 meters above sea level, comprises 42% of the total land area of Nepal and is inhabited by 45.5% of the total population.⁴ Finally there is the Tarai, which is the most fertile region, consisting of lowland area less than or equal to 610 meters above sea level. The Tarai covers 23% of the total land area of Nepal with 46.7% of the total population.

Nepal can also be divided into three horizontal cultural belts: Bhot, Pahar and Madhes. Bhot (derived from the Sanskrit word *Bhotah*) denotes the high alpine zone which is largely inhabited by the Tibetanids, which are “groups being Lamaists or followers of the Bonpo religion and speaking dialect closely related to High Tibetan (Höfer: 1979: 43). As a group, they are identified by their shared Tibetan culture and religion, although in reality, there are actually about fifteen enclaves of Tibetan-speakers extending the northern region of Nepal, each distinguished by differences in dress, architecture and spoken dialect of Tibetan (Ramble 1997: 394). The Tibetanids depend primarily on agriculture and long-distance transhumance for their livelihood. Due to their proximity to Tibet, they also engage in trade between Tibet and the middle hills.

Furthest to the south is Madhes, the plains, or more commonly known as the Tarai. Bounded by the Mahakali river in the west and the Mechi river in the east, and by the India states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal to the south, it is inhabited by various castes and tribals who share cultural, religious and economic ties with India. Since malaria was eradicated in the 1960's, much of the dense forest was cleared by settlers, creating favourable conditions for the cultivation of cash crops such as paddy, wheat, jute and sugarcane. Today, over 70% of cultivated land is in the Tarai, thus making it the main source of agricultural products for Nepal.

The middle hill region, also known as Pahar (meaning ‘hill’), is the very matrix of Nepal's history. In the 18th century, Prithvi Narayan Shah, a ruler from

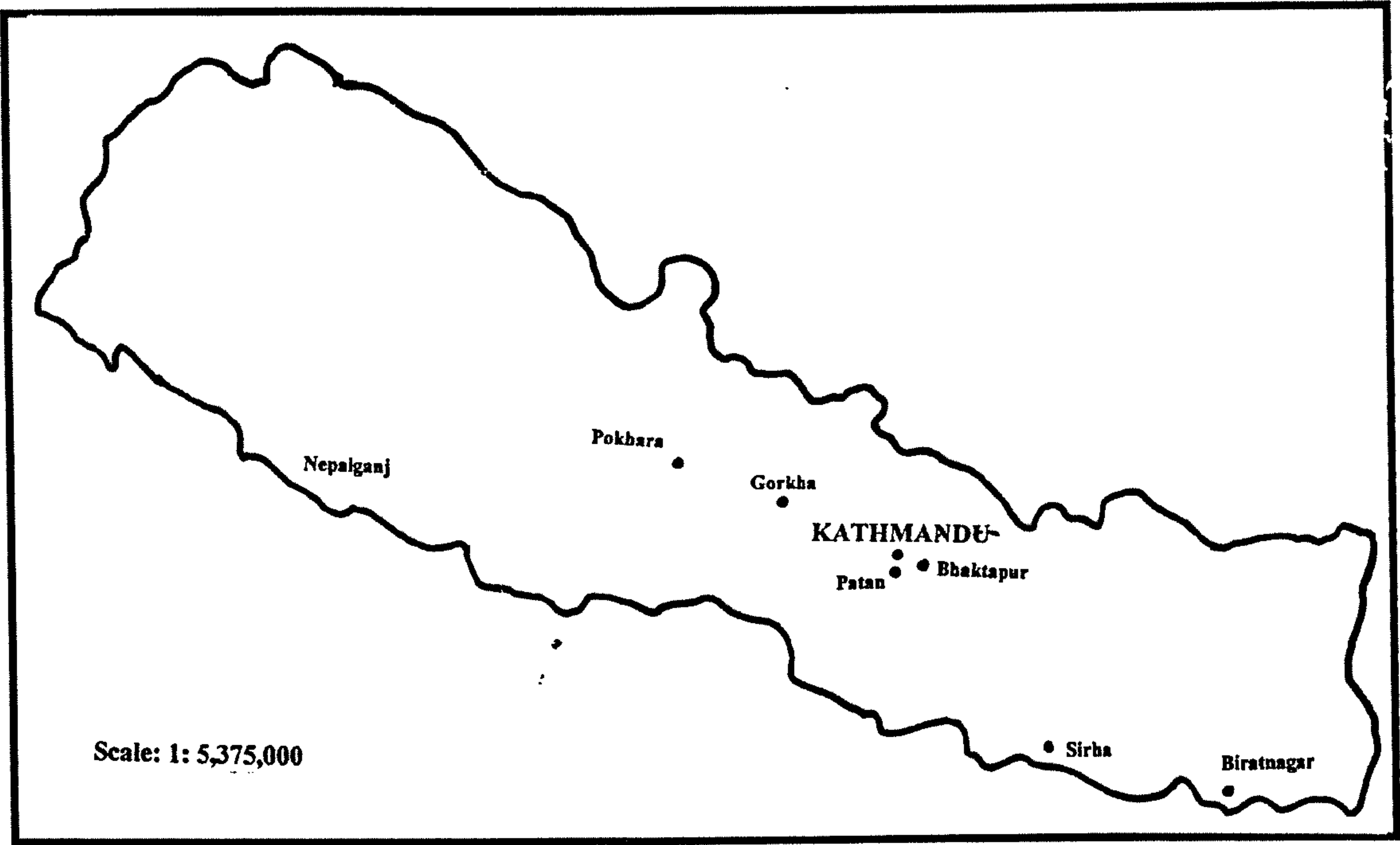
³ CBS 1995: 26-7

⁴ CBS 1995: 26-7

Map 1a. Location of Nepal



Map 1b. Enlarged map of Nepal



a small state of Gorkha conquered the Kathmandu Valley and began the process of bringing the whole of Nepal under Gorkha rule. In the wake of the Gorkha military conquest was a process some have termed the 'Hinduization' or 'Sanskritization' of Nepal, as the dominant Parbatiya (who are a Hindu ethnic group originally from the Karnali and Gandaki basins) migrated eastwards.

Although several scholars have debated the extent to which other hill groups have been influenced by Parbatiya culture, some features are beyond dispute: Nepali, which is the language of the Parbatiyas is today the national language of Nepal, and Parbatiya festivals are celebrated nationwide. Today, the middle hill region is inhabited mainly by hill natives (such as Magar, Gurung and Tamang) and hill caste groups (such as the Chetri, Brahman and Newar) who depend on the cultivation of rice and other crops on the terraced hillsides for their livelihood.

The Kathmandu Valley, located at an altitude of 4400 feet, stands apart from the other steep-sided valleys that are found in the Himalayan range in central Nepal in terms of its wealth and cultural elaboration. Its location has enabled the Gorkhas to control valuable trade routes between India and Tibet, while its fertile soil and favourable climate made it a key target for invaders and immigrants alike. These factors combined have led to the development of an elaborate division of labour as well as complex religious traditions that are unique to the Kathmandu Valley (Gellner 1992: 9).

The Kathmandu Valley comprises three separate cities: Patan, Bhaktapur and Kathmandu city (see Map 1b).⁵ Kathmandu city (hereafter Kathmandu), the setting for this study, is Nepal's capital and its commercial and industrial hub. Covering an area of 395 km², it has a total population of 675,431 (1991 Census). The area that I have chosen for my fieldwork is represented in Map 2a. It roughly corresponds to the district boundary of Kathmandu, as bounded by the Ring Road to the west, north and east and by the Bagmati river in the south.

⁵ Of the three original cities of the Valley, two, Kathmandu and Patan now form a single conurbation.

The Muslim Landscape of Kathmandu

Muslim activity in Kathmandu mainly revolves around the two mosques located at the heart of the city (see Map 2b). Located no more than 500 metres from each other, the Nepali and Kashmiri mosques stand on the same side of Ghantaghar, a busy one-way street that leads to the Royal Palace. Both mosques are guarded by high walls; a pedestrian walking on the same side of the street may be forgiven for not noticing the minarets that tower just above him. The main gates of the mosques are often closed, unless it is time for the Friday prayers, when they allow the onlooker a glimpse of what lies beyond.

Daily life at the mosques is punctuated by prayers which are performed five times a day. However, the number of Muslims that perform their daily prayers at the mosque is few. On any given day, no more than twenty or thirty are

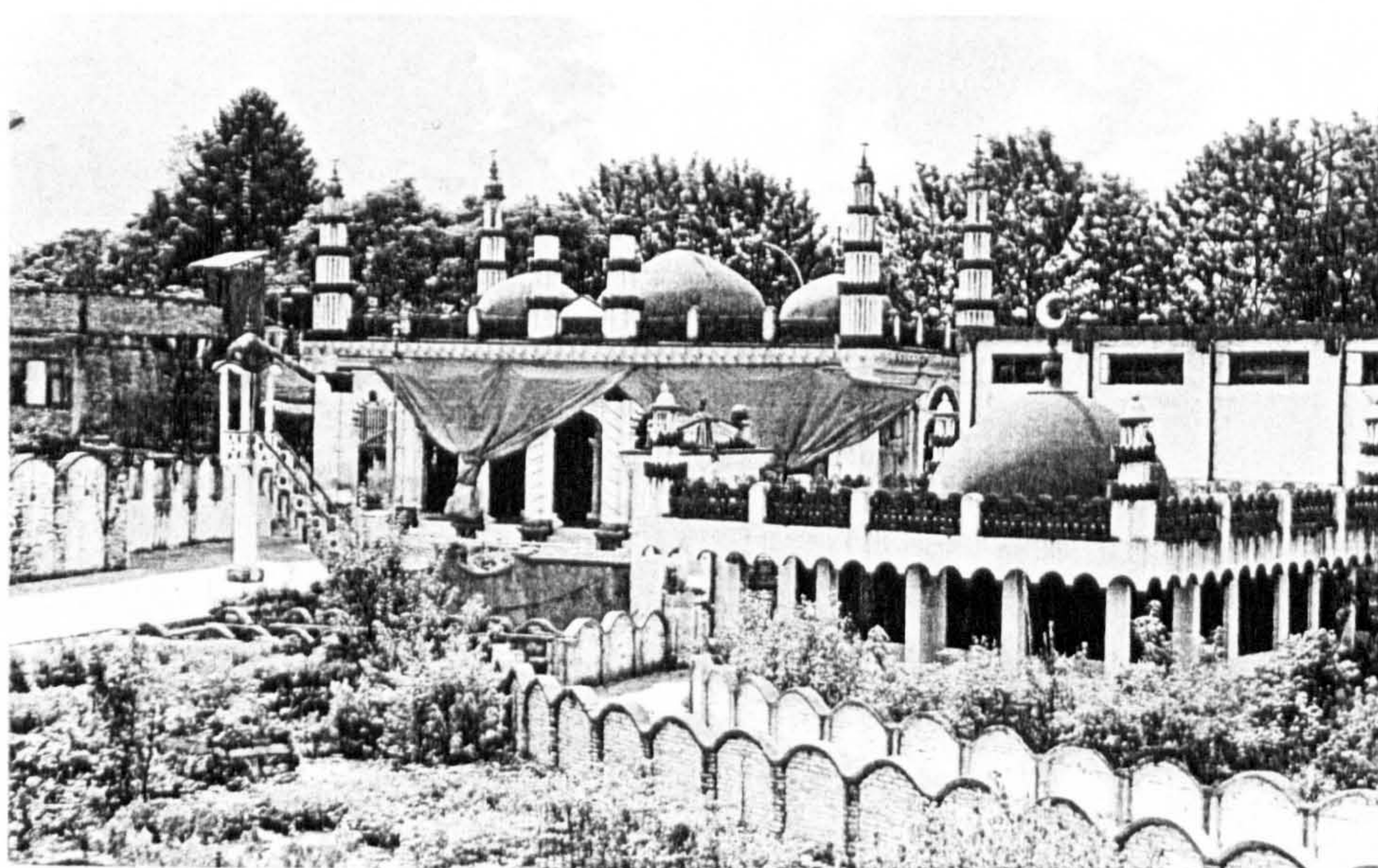
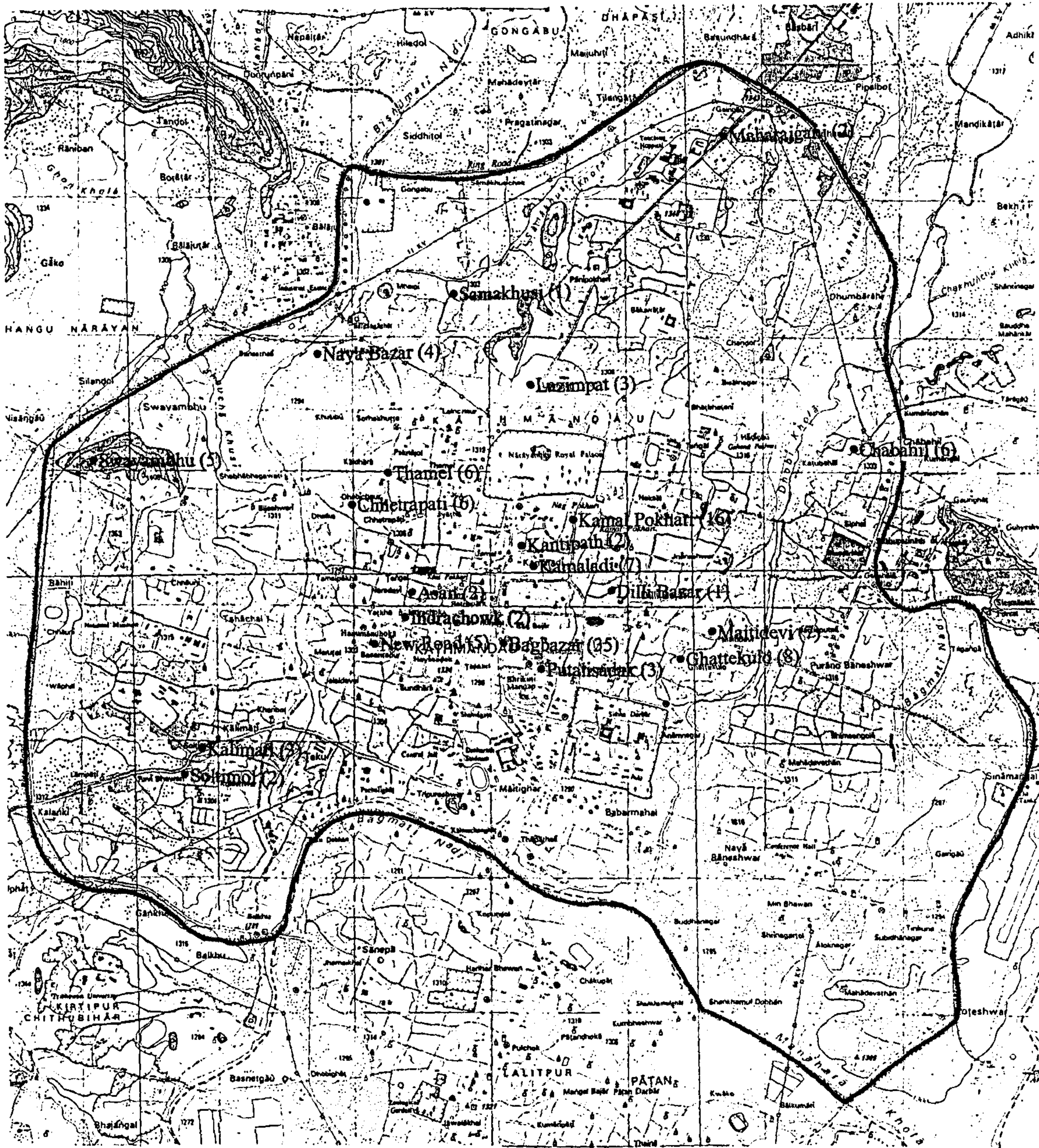


Figure 1: Interior view of the Kashmiri Mosque

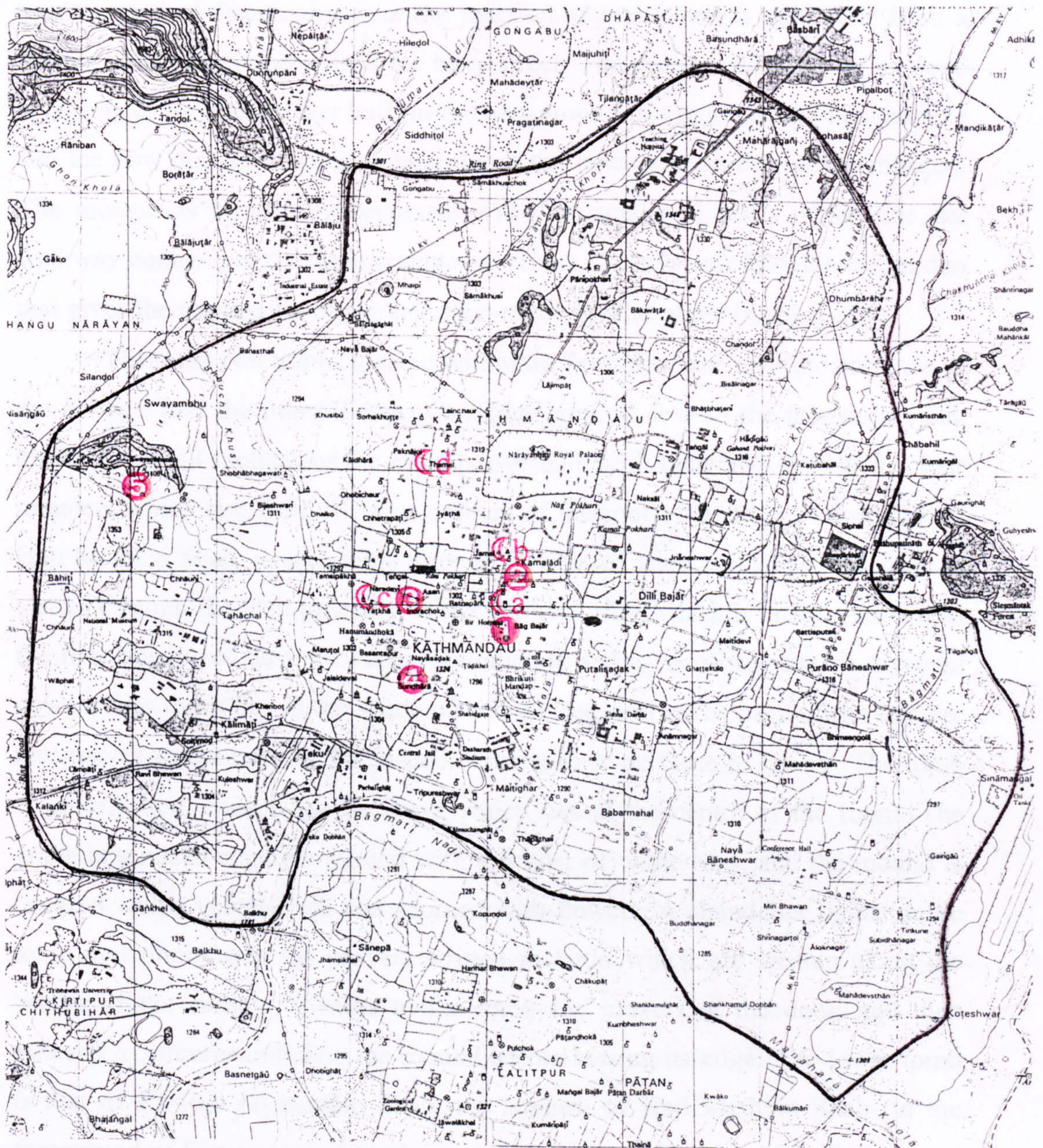
present, usually office workers, employees of the mosque, foreign visitors and retirees. However, on Fridays, for about half an hour between 12:30 to 1pm and again at 1:30 to 2pm, Ghantaghar and the surrounding roads are congested by the volume of human traffic that makes its way to and from the mosques for the communal Friday prayers.

Map 2a: Distribution of Muslim Households in Kathmandu

No. of Households Surveyed: 126



Map 2b: Muslim Landmarks of Kathmandu



Legend

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| ① Jame Market (Muslim Restaurants) | ④ Sundhara (Muslim Butchers) |
| ③ Kashmiri Bazar (Bead Shops) | ② Islamic Library |
| ⑤ Swayambhu Muslim Cemetery | |
| Ⓐ Nepali Jame Mosque | Ⓒ Razi Mosque |
| Ⓑ Kashmiri Mosque | Ⓓ Thamel Mosque |

The Kashmiri and Nepali Jame Mosques

The Kashmiri mosque, the older of the two mosques, is located at the northern end of Ghantaghar near the junction of Jamal, and is accessible from a narrow gate which opens onto the busy street. The mosque is made up of three complexes: the main prayer hall (in the background of Figure 1), the new annexe and the now disused *madrasah* building at the innermost section of the mosque. The mosque is beautifully decorated with low scalloped walls which line the walkway connecting the three complexes. There is also a carefully tended garden that gives the impression of a green oasis in the middle of the bustling city.

There are two tombs located within the premises, one near the entrance of the mosque and the other located on higher ground next to the *madrasah*. The tombs are small replicas of the main prayer hall, with their own domes and four minarets which rise from the four corners of the roofs. The upper tomb, that of Haji Mishkin Shah, is accessible through a series of gates and steps that lead the visitor through the lush greenery of the garden. Haji Mishkin Shah is known as the first Muslim to have arrived in Kathmandu and is renowned for his mystical powers. His tomb lies in the shade of a large tree, and at the base of the tree are receptacles where incense are placed, lending their perfume to the air. The tomb is unfurnished, except for the grave which lies at the centre of the room. The grave is a raised concrete mound with a border of white tiles, and the mound is covered with a velvet cloth and adorned with flowers. A chandelier lights up the tomb and illuminates the prayers written in Urdu which are written along the border of the ceiling. Visitors to the tomb say prayers at the door, and then proceed to circumnambulate the mound before kissing its edge. The lower tomb is that of Khwaja Gyasuddin Shah, the nephew of Haji Mishkin Shah (in the foreground of Figure 1). His tomb is similar to that of Haji Mishkin Shah except that on the premises of his tomb are two graves of his closest relatives, a reminder of the time when Muslims were buried around the mosque.

The new annexe is a three-storeyed building with graceful arches that face the pond where ablutions are performed before prayer. Adjacent to the new annexe is the building used to house the *madrasah*. Its doors closed for over

twenty years, it stands as a reminder of the centrality of the Kashmiri mosque in Muslim society, a role that is now taken by the Nepali mosque nearby.

Next to the Kashmiri mosque, above a busy tea-shop, is the office of the Islamiya Yuva Sangh (IYS), the Islamic youth organization which was established in 1985. According to the head of the IYS, there are 100 members in Kathmandu, and over 15,000 nationwide. Adjacent to the office of the IYS is the Islamic library, which is managed by the IYS. It stocks books in English, Urdu and Nepali, which they receive as donations mainly from India. The library employs a librarian, whose job is to oversee the day-to-day running of the library as well as to facilitate the talks and meetings that are sometimes held there.

The aim of the IYS is to propagate Islam among Muslims, 'to call Muslims to the real Islam.' To this end, they hold study camps, invite intellectuals and religious leaders to speak at their seminars and organize a weekly talk for all Muslim students. The IYS also organizes scholarships for Muslims to study, both at home and abroad. Since its inception in 1985, over 500 students have received financial help, and 30 have graduated from universities in India and Bangladesh. When this research was conducted, there were 40 students in foreign universities studying for 'professional' degrees, including engineering, chemistry and forestry. The land on which the library is built belongs to the Millate Islamiya, a socio-political group which supports the IYS.

Further south, across the side road that leads into Kamaladi, is the clock tower, which is a part of the Tribhuvan university. Next to it is the egg-yellow building that is the Nepali mosque. At four storeys high, it cuts an impressive silhouette at the busy junction of Baghbazar (see Figure 2). The Nepali mosque was renovated in the eighties; although the four-storey building is finished, the other annexe, which is located inside the premises, was still under construction when this research was conducted in 1999.

Entry to the mosque is by a side gate which is open to public, and near the entrance is an array of shelves for the visitor to place his shoes. The first building one encounters is the office of the Nepali Jame mosque, where the committee members meet and where all administrative work, such as the keeping of accounts, is done. Adjacent to the office is the unfinished annexe which is three

stores high. Despite the rough concrete and lack of safety barriers, the annex is filled during Friday prayers. Across the office is the main building, with its spacious foyer, carpeted floors and open ground. The Nepali mosque is also the main base for pilgrims who are going for the Haj. Because all flights to Mecca leave from Kathmandu, pilgrims from outside the Valley (as well as their well-wishers, which often outnumber the pilgrims four to one) converge at the Nepali mosque prior to the flight for Mecca. The pilgrims and their well-wishers are allowed to sleep at the mosque during that time – the men in the main building, the women in the unfinished annexe – while the Nepali mosque committee

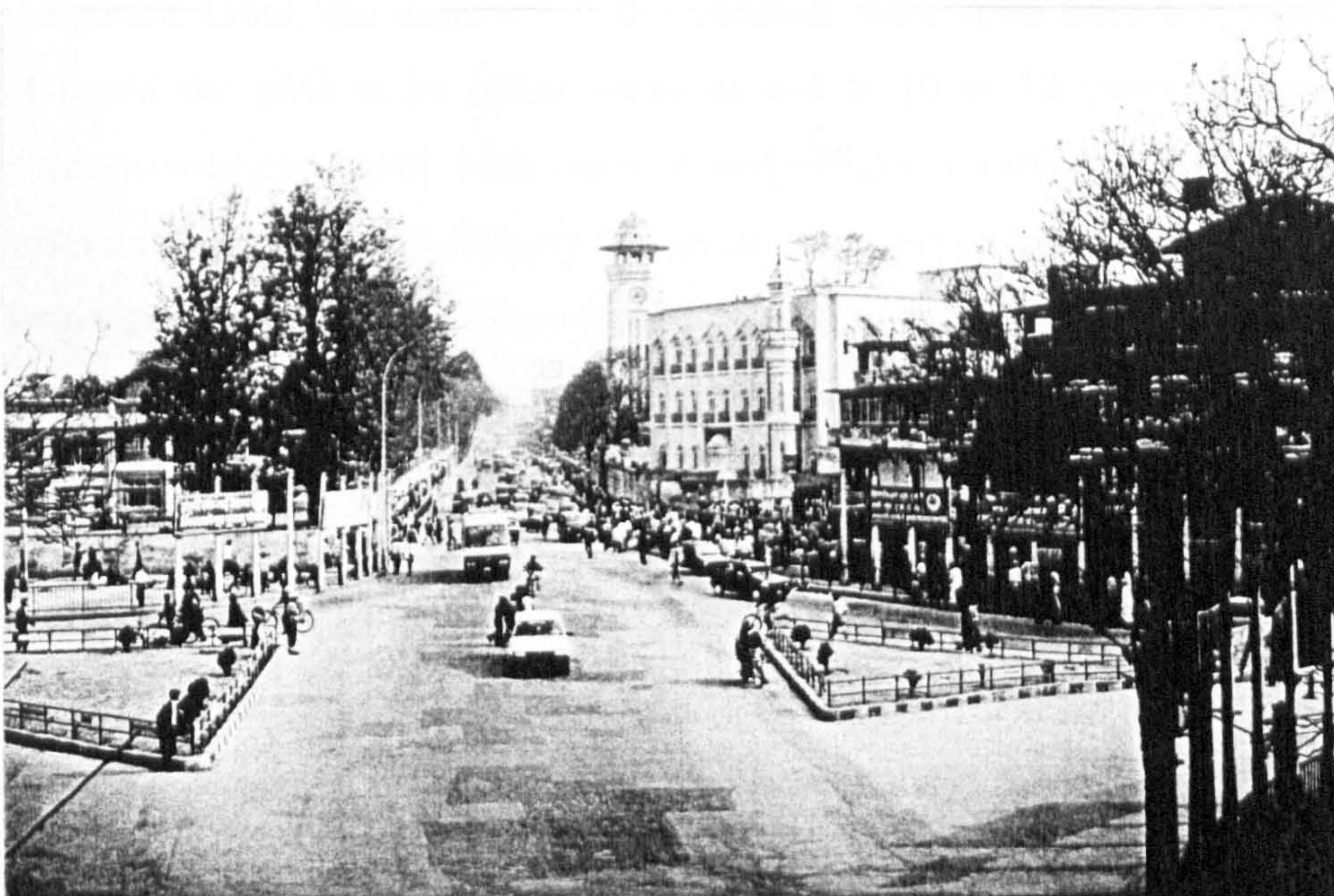


Figure 2: Junction of Ghantaghar (facing) and Baghbazar (right)

organizes their meals. In 1999, over 10,000 meal tickets were sold to the pilgrims and their well-wishers over a three-day period.

The Madrasah at the Nepali Mosque

Adjoining the mosque is the Madrasah Islamiya School. In order to reach the *madrasah*, one has to go into a small lane by the side of the mosque, past the communal pond (where ablutions for prayer are performed), a tea-shop and a butcher shop. The *madrasah* caters to local Kathmandu Muslims as well as those

from outside Kathmandu. It incorporates a hostel for boys as well as accommodation for some members of the school staff.

I volunteered to teach at the *madrasah* while I was in Kathmandu, and they offered me a few classes a week. Although the majority of the students are Muslims, there were also 5-6 non-Muslims. Half the students come from India, while the rest are Nepalese, mostly from the Tarai. The ratio of boys to girls in my classes were almost 1:1. However, it became obvious that while there seems to be equality when it comes to the boy-girl ratio, the age of the girls who attend the school was much higher than that of the boys. For example, in the Lower Kindergarten Class, the majority of the children were aged from 6-8 years old, but I found the girls to be older, some as old as 10 or 12 years of age. The curriculum was combined both secular and religious subjects. The school is government-registered and follows the government prescribed syllabus up to the seventh class. In addition to following the national syllabus which includes math, science and English subjects, the students are also given lessons Urdu language, and Quranic studies.

The Jame Market and the Tomb of Hazrat Mahal

At the junction of Baghbazar and Ghantaghar, next to the Nepali Jame mosque, is a shopping complex called the Jame Market. The land on which it is built is owned by the Nepali Jame mosque, and the rent paid by the various businesses that occupy the building make up a substantial portion of the mosque's revenue. The shops in the Jame Market include three restaurants, a tea-shop, a bookshop, a leather shop and a telecommunications company. To cater for the Muslim population, the shops at the Jame Market are all *halal* and north-Indian and Nepalese cuisine. The patrons are often Muslim tourists who find its location next to the mosque convenient. The locals however, tend to stay away. A Muslim man commented, "I never eat there. People will wonder what is wrong in my home that I have to eat outside." While eating at restaurants may be socially unacceptable for some local Muslims, tea-drinking is very much the accepted past-time, and the tea-shop makes brisk business at all hours of the day.

Next to the Jame Market is a small enclosure surrounded by a low iron fence. Inside the enclosure are some shrubs and flowering plants which surround the tomb of Hazrat Begum Mahal, the wife of the Sultan of Oudh. It is said that her arrival in Kathmandu led to the development of the Hindustani mosque. However, unlike the tombs located in the Kashmiri mosque which are open to all, the tomb of Hazrat Mahal is closed. Its location, at the corner of the busy junction of Baghbazar, makes it an awkward stop for those who wish to visit the tomb. There is a rumour that the real location of Hazrat Mahal's tomb is elsewhere, and that the 'fake' tomb was placed there to protect Muslim land from being taken away by the government.

Indrachowk, the Kashmiri Bazar and the Raqi Mosque

Another area where there is a strong Muslim presence is the Indrachowk area, where the Kashmiri Bazar is located. Although Indrachowk is the site where the Muslims first settled in Kathmandu (see Chapter Three), the descendants of its original inhabitants have long moved out. When this research was carried out in 1998, there were only nine Muslim households out of one thousand households in the same area. The Muslim character of Indrachowk is derived not from its inhabitants, but rather the Kashmiri Bazar, which is owned almost exclusively by Muslims.⁶ The Bazar is famous for its glass beads which are threaded and made into the *mangal sutra*, the wedding necklace worn by Hindu women. The majority of the bead-sellers live outside Indrachowk, although they admit that their forefathers used to live there. As Map 2b shows, there is a mosque at Indrachowk. Not more than three minutes' walk from the Bazar is the Raqi mosque. The mosque is actually a large room, about 15 by 20 metres, located above a tailor's shop in an alley. Despite its small size, it is one of the oldest mosques in Kathmandu. According to oral history, the mosque got its name from the Iraqi traders that used to trade in Kathmandu.

⁶ Out of a total of 34 shops, there is only one shop which is owned by a non-Muslim.

Thamel Mosque

Another Muslim enclave is located in Thamel, the tourist area of Kathmandu. Located about ten minutes' walk from the University campus, it is a cul-de-sac where six Muslim households are located. A sign at the junction with the main road proudly proclaims in English "*Halal* Meat Available Here," one of the hints that there are Muslims in the area. In the 1970's a Muslim who used to live in the area sold his three-storey house to a group of Muslims who had then converted the house into a mosque. The mosque caters mainly to the Muslim shopkeepers and workers in the Thamel area.⁷ Along the same road, there is also a Muslim tea-shop and a butcher.

Sundhara

The traditional place for finding *halal* meat is Sundhara. A Muslim man who came to Kathmandu in the early 1960's recalled that at the time, the only place where *halal* meat was sold was at Sundhara. "There were only 2 or 3 Muslim butchers, and they opened their shop a for few hours during the day. It was very difficult for us to get *halal* meat then. Now it is easier. There are a few Muslim butchers in other places as well," he said. To the locals, Sundhara and the surrounding area is known for its fresh produce and meat market. The Muslim butchers, however, are located in a separate area. The meat often found at these shops are mutton and buffalo meat which have been prepared according to Islamic rites. From my interivews with the butchers, there is an estimated one hundred butchers in Kathmandu. Some work for the local Newar butchers, while others own their own meat shops.

The Mosque and Muslim Cemetery at Swayambhu

At the base of Swayambhu is the only Muslim cemetery in Kathmandu (see Map 2b). Covering an area of about 16 annas, It is divided into two sections: the Nepali (10 annas) and the Kashmiri (6 annas). Each side is also represented by different caretakers who administer the funeral rites and maintain the

⁷ It should be noted that the Muslim shopkeepers and workers who in Thamel, like those in the Kashmiri Bazaar, do not live in the area where they work.

cleanliness of the cemetery. The Kashmiri side of the cemetery can be distinguished from the elaborate tombs that are built around some of the graves. Some of these bear a resemblance to the tombs in the Kashmiri mosque, with a dome and minarets as well as a velvet cloth which covers the grave. These are the graves of the elders of the established Kashmiri families in Kathmandu; their death anniversary is observed at the cemetery by their descendants. Only the descendants of these Kashmiris are allowed to be buried on the Kashmiri side of the cemetery. This criteria is fixed according to genealogy as well as sect – new immigrants from Kashmir (such as those who had fled the violence in the 1980's) are not allowed to be buried in the Kashmiri side of the cemetery. Also, according to the Kashmiri elders, Kashmiri Muslims who have converted to the Deobandi sect are prohibited from being buried in the Kashmiri side of the cemetery.

In contrast, the Nepali side of the cemetery is simply a flat piece of ground with not a stone in sight. There are no grave markings, in keeping with the Deobandi prohibition on any kind of veneration to any beings or objects other than God. The Nepali caretakers handle all Muslim burials that do not fall under the purview of the Kashmiri caretakers. The boundary between the Kashmiri and Nepali side is not marked either; the caretakers know their respective areas instinctively. On the Nepali side, there is also a small mosque and nearby, a *madrasah*. The mosque also draws some of the Muslims in nearby areas for Friday prayers.

Who is a Muslim?

There are 653,218 Muslims in Nepal, constituting 3.5 percent of the total population (1991 Census). However, unlike the 1954 Census which subsumes all Muslims under one category, the 1991 census identified two separate categories: Muslim and Churaute⁸ (Gurung 1998), implying that the Churaute are a separate social/ethnic group from other Muslims. As a result of this division, there have been a few inconsistencies in the enumeration of Muslims – only 24 out of 103 districts showed parity between the number of Muslims enumerated (as one category) and the total which is derived from adding up the two separate

⁸ The Churaute are a Muslim group found mainly in the hill region of central Nepal

categories. In 48 districts, the total of the two separate categories was more than the Muslims enumerated as a single category. Overall, if the two categories are added together, the total would then be 654,833, a discrepancy of 1615 more than the total which is presented in the 1991 Census.

It is important to note that there is another problem with the enumeration of Muslims in Nepal: because Nepal has an open border with India, Indian Muslims make up an unknown proportion of the Muslim population. In enumerating the census, Muslims are usually lumped together as one religious group, whereas other groups are differentiated by their surname or caste, which may give an indication of their geographical origin. Although Muslims tend to think that their number is being under-inflated in the census, if we take the citizenship of Muslims into consideration, it is possible that the number of Muslims in Nepal is inflated by Muslim immigrants from India and elsewhere.

The issue of citizenship is a sensitive one. When this research was carried out in 1998, there was a lot of resentment among the local Muslims about the lack of jobs in the capital and the general perception was that the influx of Indians was to blame. According to the 1991 Census, out of a total population of 18 million people, 91,000 (0.5 percent) were people of foreign citizenship living in Nepal. Indians made up the bulk of the foreign population with 68,489 people (75 percent), while 6395 (7 percent) were Chinese citizens, about 12,000 (13 percent) were of other citizenship and 3333 (5 percent) chose not to declare their citizenship. In Kathmandu, the proportion of foreign citizens is marginally higher – about 1 percent of the total population. Again, Indian citizens make up 79.5 percent of the foreign citizens, followed by the Chinese who account for 3.9 percent.

Some of these foreign citizens have lived and worked in Kathmandu for several generations, but still hold foreign citizenship. A more recent case is that of the Tibetan Muslims who arrived in Kathmandu in the early 1960's. Some of them, despite having lived in Nepal for 25-30 years, still hold Indian passports. When I asked what nationality they are, they proudly admitted they are Nepalese Muslims, but when I asked what passports they hold, they reluctantly admit that they hold Indian passports. They were worried that declaring themselves as

Indian Muslims might jeopardize their status in Nepal. Their anxiety stems from the fact that they do not feel secure in Nepal and they are at pains not to draw attention to themselves and their status as foreigners.

Occupation of Muslims

The data was gathered from personal interviews with 325 respondents⁹. In contrast to the Muslims in other parts of Nepal who are engaged primarily in agriculture, none of the Muslims surveyed are engaged in agriculture. Kathmandu is an urban centre, and the employment opportunities are in the urban, rather than the rural sector. There are two Muslim landowners who allow others to till their land in return for a portion of the harvest, although they admit that the agricultural surplus from the land is negligible compared to what could be gained from developing the land into houses or office space. In survey, there were only two who openly admitted that they are landowners. Others were wary of declaring their land ownership, for fear that it might be used for taxation purposes.

The issue of being guarded about one's profession was pervasive in the survey. While some respondents were specific about their profession, others were more ambiguous about describing what exactly they do. When asked what work they do, the answer given is "I do some work here and there" or "I do many kinds of work". These include odd-job workers whose employment varies from day to day. Others, although unemployed for most of the time I was there, refused to say that they are unemployed, opting instead to say that they do 'some work'. The Muslim men I interviewed seemed keen to project the image that they are capable, working men. Therefore, it is not surprising that only 6 out of 362

⁹ Those whose occupations are ambiguous have been categorized under 'unspecified'. By ambiguous I mean that although they say that they are not unemployed, they do not specify their profession or their source of income.

Table 1. Occupation of Muslims

Factory Workers	(62M)	62	Lecturer	(4M)	4
Home-makers	(70F)	70	Doctor	(3M)	3
Not specified	(12F, 32M)	48	NGO	(1F, 2M)	3
Business	(4F, 24M)	28	Civil Servant	(1F, 2M)	3
Embroidery	(28M)	28	Landlord	(2M)	2
Mosque	(21M)	21	Media	(2M)	2
Teacher	(6F, 12M)	18	Import/Export	(2M)	2
Retired	(10M)	10	Fitness	(1F,1M)	2
	Civil Service	4	Computing	(1F, 1M)	2
	Politician	2	Advertising	(1M)	1
	Businessman	2	Cloth Dyer	(1M)	1
	Engineer	1	Cook	(1M)	1
	Teacher	1	Embassy	(1M)	1
Handicraft Shop	(7M)	7	Engineer	(1M)	1
Working Abroad	(6M)	6	Newsreader	(1M)	1
Jeweller	(6M)	6	Politician	(1M)	1
Unemployed	(6M)	6	Restaurant Owner	(1M)	1
Bead Shop	(5M)	5	Salesman	(1M)	1
Tourism	(1F, 4M)	5	Watch repairer	(1M)	1
Hotel Owner	(5M)	5	Bangle Shop	(4M)	4

Total: 362

Males: 265

Females: 97

people (1.65 percent) claimed to be unemployed and all six were young men who were actively seeking work.

Interestingly, there were no women who considered themselves unemployed – women who stay at home, be they wives, widows, divorcees or unmarried daughters, say that they do housework, or, in Nepali, '*ghār hernay*' which literally means 'to watch the house'. Home-makers constitute 19.33 percent of the total working population. In addition to performing housework, some women also do part-time work to contribute to the household income. These include doing part-time cleaning jobs for other households, home-based clerical and handicraft work. In one household I visited, three generations of women would sit together everyday after lunch to thread glass beads into necklaces to be sold at the local bead market. One of them even boasted that she once managed to surpass her brother's monthly salary by threading beads in her free time. There were 12 of these women, who, when asked what work they do, said that in addition to the housework, they also have 'other' work.

Of all the professions, factory workers make up the largest group, with 62 out of 325 persons (18.9 percent). The respondents in the survey were workers at two clothing factories which employed almost exclusively Muslim men from Bihar, Biratnagar, Uttar Pradesh and Darjeeling in India.¹⁰ These factories do not have signboards or names. They are situated in crowded residential areas and the only clue one had as to the existence of a factory is the unmistakable whirr of sewing machines going at full speed. These factories hire between 30 and 50 people, and one was owned by a non-Muslim. The other factory was owned by two Muslim brothers from India who have been living in Kathmandu for almost 15 years. These factory workers are but a small percentage of the total number of Muslim immigrant workers in the capital. I was told by the factory workers that there are at least 10 such factories in Kathmandu.

Another industry which hires foreign Muslim immigrants is embroidery, which has 28 people, all of whom are men. This group is different from the factory workers in two respects: the structure of the business they work in and the quality of the work involved. In the factory, there are usually one or two

¹⁰ I found a total of 8 workers who were non-Muslims at these two factories.

supervisors who oversee the work of 30-50 men. Meals and prayers are communal, and most factories have designated spaces for the men to cook and pray. Although some factory workers do embroidery work, the quality of the embroidery demanded is not as high as those who are in the embroidery business. Those in the embroidery business usually work in small shops that line the streets of Jyatha, Jhocche and Thamel, the main tourist areas. Each shop has about 2-5 men, each producing embroidery for wholesale and retail orders. For the untrained worker, apprenticeship can take one to two years of unpaid labour (although meals and accommodation are provided). Also, because the industry caters to the tourist market, these embroiderers have to show a high degree of creativity and skill in producing custom-made emblems and patches.

Thirty-six of those surveyed were in some form of 'business', a blanket term used to describe a diverse range of activities such as shop-keeping, trading and small-scale industry. This category also includes four women who participate in their family business on full-time basis – two are in the antique business and two do administrative work for their family's clothing company.

There were 13 Muslim teachers out of the sample of 325. Four were female graduates teaching in private schools, while eleven were male graduates teaching in the *madrasah*. There seems to be a gender bias in the employment of women in the *madrasah*. There was only one female teacher at the *madrasah* and she was a non-Muslim. When I asked the female teachers why they did not teach at the *madrasah*, they said that they were shy to work there and they were worried that it might lead to gossip in the Muslim community. "People would talk," one female teacher said to me. Although it was not mentioned, it is well known that the pay at the *madrasah* is also not as good as that in the private schools.

The survey also produced seven Muslims who sell Kashmiri handicrafts. These shops are almost identical in the type of goods that they sell: hand-woven carpets, woollen and pashmina shawls, wood carvings, papier-mâché ornaments and leather garments. When I interviewed them, they proudly proclaimed that almost all the shops selling Kashmiri handicrafts are run by Muslims from

Kashmir¹¹. Most of them came to Kathmandu with their families to escape the rising violence in Kashmir. Again, the seven that were surveyed are part of a larger population of first generation Muslims from Kashmir who have shops all over the city, especially in tourist areas such as Durbar Marg and Thamel. An estimate of the number of shops selling Kashmiri handicrafts would be in the range between 20-30.

Four out of the sample surveyed owned shops selling bangles and ladies' accessories such as make-up and costume jewellery. The four men I interviewed were related to each other and live within the same vicinity. They have lived in the area for at least 50 years and they have been in the business of selling bangles and accessories for as long as they could remember. They say that they do not have any business or genealogical links to the Churaute of the hills who also manufacture and sell bangles. The bangles and accessories that they sell are imported from India and China.

Twenty-one people in the survey were working at the mosques or the *madrasah* as caretakers and administrators (those who teach at the *madrasah* are categorized under 'teachers'). They are all men, some of whom live on the premises rent free with their families. Sixteen of these men are employed at the Nepali mosque (and its adjoining *madrasah*) while five are employed at the Kashmiri mosque.

Five out of those surveyed said that they sell beads for a living. The bead market, which is located at Indrachowk, is known as Pote (bead) bazaar. The shops have existed for over 300 years. In the beginning, it was owned exclusively by the Kashmiri Muslims who used to trade in the glass beads. That is why among some of the older generation Muslims, the Pote bazaar is also known as the Kashmiri bazaar. Today, due to intermarriage with, and transfer of ownership to non-Kashmiri Muslims, proprietorship of the shops is no longer exclusively Kashmiri, although ownership is still predominantly Muslim: only one shop out of the thirty-four is owned by a Hindu. The interesting aspect about the Pote bazaar is that it caters to a predominantly Hindu market. The beads, which come from Japan and Czechoslovakia, are usually made into sacred necklaces called

¹¹ Out of 18 shopkeepers interviewed, only one was a Nepalese Hindu.

‘mangal sutra’ which are worn by the Hindu Bahun and Chhetri brides. Muslim women do not wear any of the bead products from the bazaar.

Distribution of Muslims in Nepal and Kathmandu

According to the 1993 CBS, there are 625,150 Muslims in the Tarai region, which accounts for 95.7 percent of the total Muslim population in Nepal (Gurung 1998). They are dominant in Rautahat (17.2 percent of the total population), Kapilvastu (16.8 percent) Banke (16 percent) and Parsa (12.3 percent). Muslims in the Kathmandu Valley account for 0.93 percent (6080 persons) of the total population of Muslims in Nepal (1991 Census). This can be further broken down into the Muslim population of the three cities of Lalitpur (593), Bhaktapur (110) and Kathmandu (5377).

A total of 126 Muslim households in Kathmandu were surveyed for this research. This figure is derived mainly from personal interviews and supplemented by data gathered from compiled ward profile¹² for ward 27 (which includes Indrachowk), and the voter list for ward 31 (which includes Baghbazar, Kamaladi and Putalisadak). Map 2a shows that the Muslims are mostly located within a 1.5km radius from Ghantaghar, where the two main mosques are located. The area with the highest number of Muslims is Baghbazar, the area directly adjacent to the Nepali Jame mosque. The survey revealed 35 Muslim households, with approximately 200 persons in total. Despite the relatively large number of Muslims in the area, the number of Muslims in proportion to the total number of households is small. An inquiry at the ward office revealed that the number of households in the area is about 500¹³, which would mean that the number of Muslim households accounts for only 7 percent of the total number of households.

¹² Kathmandu is divided into 35 administrative wards. The ward profile is a comprehensive document which provides a breakdown of the households and residents in the ward.

¹³ This was an estimate given by the ward officer. The voter list showed about 350 households, but there were several pages missing, and the voter list does not include households which are occupied by non-Nepali citizens. There was no ward profile kept at the office.

Although it is tempting to say that there is a concentration of Muslims in the central Kathmandu, the reality is that Muslim houses are often dispersed among other houses belonging to non-Muslims. Historically, however, this was not the case. During the Malla period, caste rules dictated that Muslims should be kept separate from other castes, and Indrachowk was designated as a 'Muslim' area, marked by walls and gates (Oldfield 1981: 95). The city soon outgrew its caste-based boundaries and the Muslim population eventually dispersed from Indrachowk in search of bigger homes for their growing families. According to the 1999 Profile for Ward 27 (which includes Indrachowk), there were only eleven Muslim households out of a total of 1200.

The fact that Muslims are living in mixed neighbourhoods is directly linked to the issue Muslim identity in Kathmandu. Sheikh Idris is in his fifties and has lived in Chhetrapati all of his life. When his family first moved there, there were hardly any Muslims in the area. Sheikh Idris recalls his childhood when he used to play with the Newar boys in his neighbourhood. "Even now my good friends and neighbours are Newars. We [Muslims] also follow some Newar culture," he proudly proclaimed. "We eat the *dhao baji* (curd with beaten rice) and we can also speak Newari." While Sheikh Idris was keen to show his affinity with the Newar locals, his relative Sheikh Khalil was not: "I was treated like an outcaste – I even had to wash my own cups after drinking tea in the shop." Although Sheikh Khalil no longer faces such discrimination in Kathmandu today, he still feels vulnerable as a minority in a Hindu country, something that is shared by most Muslims I spoke to.

Categories of Muslims in Kathmandu

Although the Muslims of Kathmandu represent less than one percent of the total Muslim population of Nepal, the heterogeneous composition of the population provides an interesting setting for the study of religious identity. Various terms are used to describe the different Muslim groups, including 'Nepali', 'Taraian', 'Tibetan', 'Kashmiri', 'Deobandi', 'Sunni' and 'Barelwi'. In this section, the meanings of these terms are explored.

A) Kashmiri Muslims

- i. 'Kashmiri' by birth¹⁴
- ii. 'Kashmiri' by religious affiliation
- iii. 'Kashmiri' by geographical origin

The term 'Kashmiri' can mean one of three things. The most common use of the term is to describe someone who is a descendant of Kashmiri traders who arrived in the Valley in the fifteenth century. However, not all who proclaim themselves as 'Kashmiri' are the descendants of traders. Some are the descendants of healers, cooks and Persian language specialists (not all of whom are from Kashmir) who were invited by the Malla and Shah kings to serve in their court. Up to the early nineteenth century, the only mosque in Kathmandu was the Kashmiri mosque, and it is their forefathers' involvement in the Kashmiri mosque, rather than the origin of their forefathers, which has conferred upon these Muslims the identity of being 'Kashmiri'. At some point in history¹⁵, membership into the Kashmiri mosque was closed to outsiders, which meant that new arrivals to the capital could not participate in the management of the mosque although they were allowed to pray there.

The Muslims who fall into this category are the legitimate guardians of the Kashmiri mosque. Management of the mosque (and the other properties belonging to the mosque) is in the hands of a mosque committee, which is comprised of five members elected from Kashmiri families. The genealogies of the various Kashmiri families are carefully recorded by the elders in the group so that duties and responsibilities are equally shared and to prevent any disputes over issues of inheritance and authority. According to one Kashmiri historian, there are about 70 Kashmiri households (roughly 300 Kashmiris) in Kathmandu (for an example of Kashmiri family, see Chapter Two). Those who fall into this category are also given special burial privileges on the Kashmiri side of the Muslim cemetery at Swayambhu.

¹⁴ In the chapters that follow, the term 'Kashmiri' will refer specifically to this group of Muslims.

¹⁵ Some Kashmiris claim it occurred when the Nepali Jame mosque (then called the Hindustani mosque) was established. Others claim that membership had 'never been open' and that they are all descendants of the few Kashmiri traders who first arrived in the capital.

The term 'Kashmiri' is also used to describe Muslims whose religious centre is the Kashmiri mosque. These Muslims are likely to be recent immigrants to Kathmandu who come from the Tarai. These Muslims – who sometimes call themselves Barelwi after the religious group of the same name in India (see below) - practice saint veneration, and the fact that the Kashmiri mosque is the locus of saint veneration in Kathmandu has made the mosque the primary marker of their religious identity. However, they are not allowed burial rights at the Kashmiri cemetery, nor are they eligible for membership into the mosque committee.

Finally, the term 'Kashmiri Muslim' is also used to describe the Muslims who arrived from Kashmir in the eighties and nineties. These Muslims are mostly traders who specialize in Kashmiri handicrafts and woollen products which they sell in the tourist sectors of Kathmandu such as Thamel. Apart from their common geographical origins, these Kashmiris have little in common with the Kathmandu Kashmiris. In fact, most of them are opposed to saint-veneration and do not pray at the Kashmiri mosque. They often dismiss the way that the Kathmandu Kashmiris have appropriated the term 'Kashmiri'. "After all, they have no ties with Kashmir. They don't even speak Kashmiri language. We are the true Kashmiris, not them," one shop-owner complained to me.

B) Nepali Muslims

- i) 'Nepali' as a national identity (by citizenship)
- ii) 'Nepali' as opposed to 'Kashmiri' (by religious affiliation)

The term 'Nepali Muslim' is used in two ways. It is firstly an expression of citizenship. Most Muslims who are Nepalese citizens would describe themselves first as Nepali Muslims, including the Kashmiri Muslims. In fact, some of the Kashmiri Muslims I spoke to objected my calling them Kashmiri in the first place: "We are Nepali Muslims. We were originally from Kashmir, but now we are Nepali Muslims." Tibetan Muslims are also known to describe themselves as 'Nepali Muslims' to downplay their immigrant status and affiliate themselves with the Muslim population.

Secondly, the term is also used to refer to someone who affiliates himself with the Nepali Jame mosque. This is directly linked to the issue of birthright, especially with regards to the issues of leadership of the mosque and burials in the Muslim cemetery. Put simply, all those who are not eligible for leadership of the Kashmiri mosque or for burial on the Kashmiri side of the Muslim cemetery are deemed as Nepali Muslims. This idea was expressed succinctly by the caretaker at the Nepali mosque, who said “Whoever is not a Kashmiri Muslim is a Nepali Muslim.” By this definition, the non-Kashmiri population make up more than 90 percent of the total Muslim population of Kathmandu.

Under the umbrella of the term ‘Nepali’ are various Muslim groups defined according to their geographical origins. The three discernible groups are the Taraian, Indian and Tibetan Muslims. Although the Tarai is a part of Nepal, the need for Taraian Muslims to distinguish themselves from other Muslims stems from their perceived marginalization by the Kathmandu Muslims. Interestingly, some of those who are the most vocal about their Taraian identity are highly educated professionals, such as lecturers and administrators, who are also active in mosque-related activities. One university lecturer explained, “These Kathmandu Muslims have a superiority complex. As a Taraian Muslim, someone from ‘outside,’ you have to work extra hard to prove yourself in the Muslim community.” The majority of the Taraian Muslims, however, are factory workers in the garment industry.

The term ‘Tibetan Muslim’ is generally used to refer to the Muslims who come from Tibet. There are about 30 Tibetan Muslim households in Kathmandu (see Chapter Two). They are perhaps the most clearly defined ethnic category within the Muslim community, both in terms of appearance and language. It is common to see Tibetan Muslims at a wedding wearing the Tibetan national costume, chatting amongst themselves in Tibetan and then switching effortlessly to Urdu or Nepali when conversing with non-Tibetan Muslims. Tibetan Muslims are also unique among the Muslim groups in that marriages are commonly arranged with other Tibetan Muslims. Out of 32 Tibetan marriages surveyed, only 4 were with non-Tibetan Muslims, and out of the 4, only one was with a Muslim from Kathmandu. The rest were with foreigners. Although the Tibetans

are historically linked to the Kashmiri Muslims (see Chapter Two) they are follow the Deobandi sect and align themselves with the Nepali mosque.

Ideologically, a Nepali Muslim is one who subscribes to the Deobandi sect and observes its prohibition of saint veneration and the role of mediators in Islam. Used in this way, the terms ‘Nepali’ and ‘Kashmiri’ (and, by extension, the Nepali Jame and Kashmiri mosques) represent ideological opposites, and are the local idioms for the Deobandi and Barelwi sects in Islam, which are discussed below.

Deobandi and Barelwi

NEPALGUNJ, July 2 (PR) – A mosque at Jayaspur-5 was partitioned today owing to simmering differences between the Deobandi and Barelwi sects of Muslims over the proper way of offering *namaj* [prayer]. Senior members of the Muslim community say that the Charmari mosque could be the first in the world to be partitioned for a minor difference on the way to conclude the *namaj*. The Barelwis insist that the proper way to conclude the *namaj* is by reading a *salaam* while the Deobandis do not consider the reading of the *salaam* as a must. Amidst heightened emotions, a Muslim volunteer, however, told the Kathmandu Post that the actual reason behind the partition is not the fight over the proper way to end the *namaj* but a big aid money that is due from the United Arab Emirates

Kathmandu Post 3 July 1998

The terms ‘Deobandi’ and ‘Barelwi’ originate from two religious reform movements that began in India in the latter part of the nineteenth century. They are also derived from the names of two cities in north India – Deoband and Bareilly – where the movements flourished. Because of Nepal’s proximity to these cities, it is likely that the spread of Islamic revivalist movements occurred through the existing pilgrimage and trade links between India and Nepal (Gaborieau 1993).

The above excerpt uses the terms ‘Deobandi’ and ‘Barelwi’ to denote the different Muslim groups and the issues that separate them. In the pages that

follow, I shall briefly look at the history of the Deobandi and Barelwi movements, and the ways in which these movements are interpreted and adopted by the Muslims in Kathmandu.

The Deobandi Movement

The Deobandi movement was founded by Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi (1813-1887), Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1827-1905) and other *ulama* (religious scholars/leaders) in 1867. Muhammad Qasim and Rashid Ahmad were both involved in the 1857 Rebellion, which had a significant effect on their religious policy: having failed in their attempt at political reform, they turned their attention inwards, to the education and spiritual reform of Muslim society.

The Deobandis are sometimes pejoratively called Wahhabis by their opponents. The term 'Wahhabi' is the name given to the followers of Shaykh Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1793), a scholar who rose in prominence following his alliance in 1745 with Muahmmad Ibn as-Sa'ud, the son of the founder of the Sa'udi dynasty¹⁶. As desert tribes came under the control of the al-Sa'ud family, Wahhabi doctrines provided religious legitimation to Sa'udi rule, with the Wahhabi ulama publicly giving the Sa'udi rulers their support and approval. Central to their doctrine was the idea of equality, which was used as a political tool to control the Bedouins and redefine tribal identity (Helm 1981).

In India, the use of the term 'Wahhabi' came into prominence when the Punjab was annexed in 1849. At that time, the British were worried about a group of mujahedin in the North-Western frontier who were fighting a jihad to reclaim Muslim land. The British identified the movement with the Wahhabis, having deduced that the ideas for *jihad* (holy war) must have been imported from Arabia by the leader of the group, Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi¹⁷ who had performed the Haj. However, this argument has been challenged by South Asian historians such as Noelle (1995) who finds that Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi's religious ideas about jihad

¹⁶ For the history of the Sa'udi dynasty, see Almana, Mohamad (1980) Arabia Unified: A Portrait of Ibn Saud London: Hutchinson Benham

¹⁷ The name 'Barelwi' here does not denote that Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi is a follower of the Ahl-e Sunnat sect – it simply indicates the place where he is born, which is Bareilly. The Wahhabi movement predates the establishment of the Ahl-e Sunnat.

predate his travels to Arabia. In addition, he performed the Haj ten years after the Wahhabis had lost power in Mecca and Medina, and it is not accurate to say that he is influenced by the Wahhabis, although it is possible that Wahhabi-type ideas may have been nascent in India.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the term 'Wahhabi' was a powerful label used by the British to identify the political threat that was posed by the mujahedin, implying aggression and fanaticism (Noelle 1995: 36). However, this does not detract from the theory that Indian reformism is through Wahhabi influence in Arabia. Other South Asian historians now point to the earlier ulama, such as Shah Wali Ullah (1703 - 1762) who performed the Haj in the early eighteenth century and studied in Mecca for a year, as the pioneers of the reformist movement in India. In addition, Mecca also attracted not only pilgrims but scholars and traders as well, all of whom became part of a network which ensured the exchange of ideas between Arabia and India.

In Arabia, the Wahhabis also stood for strict adherence to the Quran and Sunnah, and for the purification of Islam from its deviations and innovations. Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab condemned intercession and the excessive devotion to saints because these were deemed as polytheistic, *shirk*. He prohibited various practices that he deemed were not based on the Quran, Sunnah or the authority of the Companions, which included the celebration of the Prophet's birth and the introduction of the name of a prophet, saints or angel into one's prayer (Küçükan 1993: 239-249)

In India, the fact that the founders of the Deobandi movement were also espousing similar ideas with regards to saint veneration led to the terms 'Deobandi' and 'Wahhabi' being used interchangeably. Although the Deobandis and Wahhabis are similar in their doctrine, the externality that the term 'Wahhabi' denotes to the movement belies its reliance on Indian support. In her study of Dar-ul-Ulum, the intellectual nucleus of the Deobandi movement,

¹⁸ For a study of Wahhabi-influenced reform in Bengal, see Eaton (1994: 282). Haji Shariat Allah (d. 1840), upon his return from Haj, was appalled to see the differences between Islam that was practised in India and that which he experienced in Wahhabi Arabia. He then founded the most influential movement in Bengal, Fara'izi movement which sought to reform Indian Muslims to the Wahhabi ideal.

Metcalf (1982) notes that the founders of the school organized a network of local donors who made an annual pledge to the school. In addition, when the *fatwa* (religious ruling) wars were raging between the Ahl-e Sunnat and the Deobandis, the Deobandis sought the support of the ulama from the north Indian states of Tonk, Bhopal and Bahawapur, while the Ahl-e Sunnat sought and received the support of ulama from Mecca and Medina.

In Kathmandu, the term ‘Deobandi’ is used as the opposite of the term ‘Barelwi’. Often, the meaning of the term ‘Deobandi’ rests solely on the rejection of saint veneration, which then implies that the term ‘Barelwi’ refers to those who perform saint veneration. However, these terms, although used quite liberally in academic and media circles, are not commonly used among the Muslims themselves. Most have heard of the terms, but are not clear about what they mean. Below is an excerpt from an interview with Muslim factory workers in Kathmandu. These workers are mostly from the Tarai.

Researcher: What sort of groups are there in Kathmandu?

Worker: All are Sunnis.

Researcher: Do you know what is ‘Deobandi’?

Worker: [after consulting other workers] They don’t allow the worship of tombs.

Researcher: Are you all Deobandis?

Worker: Here, only ten percent are Deobandis and the rest are Sunnis.

Researcher: What is the difference between Deobandi and Sunni?

Worker: No difference. We all go to the same mosque.

Researcher: Which mosque is that?

Worker: Kashmiri mosque.

Researcher: Why don’t you go to the Nepali mosque?

Worker: It is always full. Wherever it is empty, we go there. Also, sometimes the Kashmiri mosque gives food, which is good. [the group laughs]

Researcher: Have you heard of the term ‘Barelwi’?

Worker: [with a smile] Of course. We are all Barelwi! Sunni and Barelwi are the same!

From the above excerpt, it is clear that the workers are not Deobandi. The meaning of the terms Deobandi, Barelwi and Sunni are not clear, which suggests that the boundaries of these groups are not well defined. For example, they conflated the terms 'Sunni' and 'Barelwi', and could not distinguish between the two. However, the rejection of tomb worship emerges as a key marker of identity for Deobandis.

For the Kathmandu Muslims, a more common way of describing those who reject saint veneration or tomb worship is to refer them as 'Nepali Muslims', a reference to the Nepali mosque which represents the Deobandi sect. The old name of the Nepali mosque is the Hindustani mosque, because it once catered to Muslims who came to Nepal as political refugees from India. The identity of the Nepali mosque as a Deobandi centre is not obvious, but the fact that it rejects saint veneration has led some people to use the term 'Deobandi' as a label for the Nepali mosque, and to call those who are affiliated with the mosque, 'Deobandis.' Otherwise, the term is hardly used in day-to-day conversations about the mosque, and the term 'Nepali' is the more common idiom.

The Barelwi or Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at Movement

As mentioned earlier, the term 'Deobandi' is often used as an opposition to the term 'Barelwi'. One of the biggest critics of the Deobandis was Ahmad Reza Khan Barelwi, a religious scholar who came from a well-established family in Bareilly. His followers are called Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at, which means "people of the sunnat¹⁹ and the community," although they are more popularly called Barelwis, after the town of Bareilly, which was the birthplace of Ahmad Riza.

Ahmad Riza established himself as an exemplary scholar early in his life; at the age of fourteen, he was already writing fatwas on various religious issues. He was also closely connected to the *ulamas* of Mecca and Medina. He not only obtained *sanads* (certificates) of scholarly achievement from them, but more importantly, he managed to get their support for his fatwa. One which was particularly significant was *Husam al-Haramain 'ala Manhar al-Kufr wa'l Main*

¹⁹ Customary practices of the Prophet Muhammad

(The Sword of the Haramain at the Throat of Kuft and Falsehood) in which he referred to Rashid Ahmad Gangholi, Muhammad Qasim Nanutawi (among others) as ‘leaders of heresy’ (Ahmad Riza Khan, quoted by Sanyal 1996: 231).

The most important element of Barelwi prophetology was the belief in Muhammad’s intercessionary role with Allah on behalf of mankind. Muhammad’s power of intercession continued even after his death; for Barelwis, the Prophet is a continuous presence in their lives. The graves of exalted spiritual beings, whether it is the Prophet Muhammad, other prophets or saints, are imbued with *baraka* (grace); the baraka of such persons is strongest at certain times, such as the celebration of birth and death anniversaries. It is also believed that these beings inhabit their graves in a state of perfect physical preservation, and thus tombs are places worthy of the highest respect.

It should be noted, however, that the term ‘Barelwi’ itself is not commonly used by the Muslims – the usual phrase to denote people who venerate saints is to identify them with the Kashmiri mosque, where saint veneration is practised. During the course of my interviews, I asked a Muslim woman what group she belongs to.

Woman: Kashmiri

Researcher: What is Kashmiri? Are you from Kashmir?

Woman: No, we are from Tarai.

Researcher: Then why do you call yourself Kashmiri?

Woman: We are the same as the Kashmiri Muslims here.

Researcher: The same? How?

Woman: We also respect *dargah sharif* [sacred shrine].

In another interview, I spoke to a Kashmiri Muslim whose family has lived in Kathmandu for several generations and I asked him if the woman I spoke to can be called ‘Kashmiri’. “They can call themselves anything they like, but they are not Kashmiri. We know who we are; we have lived here for generations. Maybe they also have similar practices as we do, but that does not make them Kashmiri.”

Miladun Nabi is the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. It is on this occasion, more than any other, that we see the difference between the Nepali and Kashmiri mosques and their congregations. The Kashmiri Muslims' celebration of Miladun Nabi is elaborate compared to the Nepali Muslims'. On the Prophet's birthday, which falls on 12 Rabiulawal, the Kashmiri mosque is decorated with coloured lights, special prayers are said and a feast is shared among all the worshippers. The celebrations also extend to the home – during the whole month of Rabiulawal the Kashmiri Muslims take turns to host the *milad* at their homes. *Milads* are the only occasions when a Nepali and a Kashmiri Muslim would share a religious ritual. The Nepali Muslims are, on the whole, not invited for *milad* unless he or she is married to a Kashmiri, in which case it is an obligation to attend. However, for those Nepali Muslims who attend, they tend to downplay their participation in a ritual that they believe is unnecessary. "It is only to show our faces and to keep good relations with the Kashmiri side of the family," said a Nepali woman who was married to a Kashmiri man. On the Nepali side, the Miladun Nabi is celebrated with less ceremony. Quranic readings are done at the Nepali mosque and in the homes, but it is not associated with any kind of feast or ritual in honour of the Prophet.

Muslim Society: A Literature Review²⁰

There is a wide range of literature on Islam, written from an equally wide range of perspectives. As the number of studies done on Muslim societies grows, so too the realization that there is a whole spectrum of beliefs and practices that are fall under the category of Islam. In fact, in a recent edition of ISIM, dissatisfaction with the term 'Muslim society' led Filali-Ansary (1999) to suggest the phrase 'societies of Muslims' in order to recognize the diversity in that exists in the Islamic world.

The problem that Filali-Ansary (1999) raises is the lack of a common ground from which to compare Muslim societies. Perhaps this is an inevitable

²⁰ Due to the discursive nature of the thesis and to prevent repetition, this literature survey will deal with the more general approaches to the study of Muslim society, rather than specific aspects of Muslim society (such as caste, religious conversion and secularism, which are dealt with in later chapters).

result of the geographical diversification of studies on Muslim society – as research becomes more and more focused on specific groups, the more entrenched it becomes in relativism. One solution to this problem has been to regard the diversity as representing different stages of Islamic development, thereby shifting the focus towards the influence of Islamic ideas in bringing about social change. The emergence of religious fundamentalism in the wake of the oil crisis in the 1970's has produced a body of work which focus on Islamic reformist groups, and the development, transmission and expression of reformist ideas (Marty and Appleby 1994; Kepel 1994; Robinson 1996).

The expression of reform, and the success or failure of reform movements is highly dependent on the social contexts within which these reforms take place. In his seminal work on Muslims of North-Africa, Gellner (1981) notes that reformist notions of purity and egalitarianism were closely linked with other processes of modernity and nation-building, thereby providing a matrix which was incompatible with the rural, saint-based religious structure. Similarly, Geertz (1968) has shown how resistance to scripturalism in Indonesia is contextualized by notions of kingship, esotericism and hierarchy.

More recently, ethnographies of Muslim society have focused on the tension between normative, scriptural Islam and the local practices. In the anthropology of South-East Asia, the work of Bowen (1993) and Beatty (1999) provide valuable insight into the dynamics of religious differences within Muslim society. The aim of Bowen's (1993) study was to analyze the ways in which the Gayo in Sumatra explain their rituals and practices in Islamic terms. In doing so, he reveals the centrality of exegesis in the construction of Gayo Muslim knowledge. In a transcript of a debate between two Gayo Muslims, he traces how a comment about the legality of mortuary recitations developed into a discursive argument about the Islamic way to argue. The two groups, the traditionalists and the reformists are negotiating issues that are centuries old, but Bowen notes that there is an implicit agreement as to how debates on contentious religious issues should be carried out. The sphere of religious debate is basically limited to issues that can be linked the Quran and Hadith. Other issues, which may be important in the lives of the Gayo, such as speaking to ancestral spirits, do not feature in such

debates because of their dubious position in the discourse of normative, scripturalist Islam.

Beatty (1999) study of Javanese religion also deals with the issue of difference between Muslim traditionalists and reformists. He highlights the issue of reconciliation, as expressed in the *slametan* a ritual feast in which both traditionalists and reformists participate. He argues that the use of ambiguous symbolism in the *slametan* allows for both parties to derive their own meaning from and retain the semblance of religious unity without openly challenging each other. This is where Beatty and Bowen's work converge: in the demarcation of religious spheres, both public and private, in which the different religious ideologies are negotiated, challenged and compromised.

Taking a slightly different perspective is Mines (1984) who dealt with the issue of identity among south Indian Muslims. In essence, Mines was critiquing the etic approach to ethnicity, which tends to overlook multiple sites of identity and views adaptations simply as responses to political or economic competition. In it, he highlighted the differences between the religious and secular identities of Muslims and suggests that religious change can be internally motivated and contained within the religious sphere. His central thesis was that identity is dependent on social structure, the corollary being which as structures change, so does identity. In the South Indian case, the Muslims assumed different religious identities as they moved from the village to the town and back again, and that the change was due to the different values and criteria upon which identity was defined.

Mines' argument is important in that it highlights one factor that is mostly overlooked by studies of religious identity. Firstly, he isolates the religious from the secular in defining identity, such that a Muslim can have a secular as well as a religious identity, depending on the context he finds himself in. Secondly, he shows how religious change does not necessarily have to be a response to external stimulus, i.e. the South Indian Muslims' move to Islamize themselves was brought about by the lack of a common identity in the towns.

The issue of diversity is also analyzed in the volumes edited by Ahmad (1976, 1978), which discuss diversity in terms of the dissonance between the

sacred texts and local traditions. The first volume, which is devoted to the issue of caste, it is argued that although Islam does not sanction caste, the Hindu environment has influenced Muslims to adopt caste-like rules with regards to their relationship with other Muslim groups. The ethnographies also show how the caste structure survives religious conversion: instead of regarding religious conversion as a break from the past, these studies have shown how there is continuity in the way that Hindu converts to Islam maintain their caste status. In the volume on Family, Kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India (Ahmad 1976) it is concluded that in terms of matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance, the *sharia* (Islamic law) is largely overrode by local traditions. The general stance adopted by Ahmad et al. (1976, 1978) is that these divergences from normative Islam are due to the influence of the local environment or the legacy from their Hindu past. In either case, the ethnographies support the general theory that Islamic styles are dependent on the society in which it occurs.

However, there has been criticism in the way that the whole debate about diversity has been framed thus far. In a response to Robinson's (1983) paper, Das criticizes his assumption of an unchanging 'Islamic standard' or essence to which all Muslims ought to achieve (Das 1984: 294). She problematizes the notions of scripture, interpretation and exegesis to challenge what she sees as essentialism in the study of Islam. In his rejoinder to Das' (1984) criticism, Robinson (1986) defends his position on the issue of the 'Islamic standard' by pointing out that Das' (1984) focus was on Islamic theology while his arguments were based on Islamic law. "It is the law which offers the most complete guidance as to how to be a Muslim; it is the law that the learned men of Islam have given the greater part of their effort" (Robinson 1986: 100).

Although the *sharia* is commonly regarded by Muslims as the only and ultimate law, its impact of Islamic law on the lives of ordinary Muslims is limited. Ahmad has shown, Islamic law has limited application in the social life of Muslims in India, or in some cases, they are overtaken by traditional customs. However, all scholars admit that these traditional customs are slowly being eroded or at least challenged by the rise in Islamic revivalism. Robinson is arguing that this Islamic revivalism is based on the immutability of the *sharia*,

and interprets the changes as part of a historical trajectory in “Muslim societies have tended to move towards, although on occasion away from the high Islamic tradition” (1986: 97). Although he has been criticized for his essentialism, I find that Robinson’s arguments useful in challenging the idea of the peaceful co-existence of the local and the universal in Muslim society.

This thesis looks at the contexts in which religious identity is expressed and the factors that influence its expression. Chapter Two is an ethnographic introduction which is based on the first six weeks of my fieldwork. It traces my introduction to, and life with three different Muslim families. It also provides an insight into way that Muslims define their identity and introduces the reader to some of the issues that will be discussed in subsequent chapters. The main issue that defines the expression of religious identity is the status of Muslims as a minority in a Hindu kingdom. This is examined in Chapter Three, which examines the history of the Muslims and their relationship with the Hindu state. The Muslims of Nepal are unique in that they were integrated into a universal caste hierarchy which was codified in the Civil Code of 1854 and which remained in force until 1964. Chapter Four examines the position of Muslims in the caste hierarchy and shows the ways in which Muslim were regarded as a marginal and separate category. It also deals with the issue of caste in Islam and examines the extent to which caste exists in Kathmandu Muslim society. In spite of their marginal status, which was the legacy of the Hindu caste hierarchy, the Muslims did not reject the Hindu state when the movement for secularism was launched in 1990. The reasons for this are discussed in Chapter Five, which also looks at the compromises that are made by the Muslims in order to live peacefully with their non-Muslim neighbours. It also shows how expressions of religious identity, such as physical appearance and *halal* food, are contextualized by their status as a religious minority. Chapter Six deals with the issue of changing identities through a study of religious conversion. In particular, it looks at the effect that the prohibition of conversion and proselytization has on the expression of religious identity by converts to Islam. Finally, Chapter Seven analyzes the role of the Tablighi Jama’at in defining Muslim identity and the response of Muslims in Kathmandu to religious reform.

CHAPTER TWO

Three Muslim Families

This chapter is a montage of mini-ethnographies of three Muslim families with whom I stayed during my fieldwork in Kathmandu. I have chosen to begin this thesis with this ethnographic study for a few reasons. Firstly, it is to provide the reader with a glimpse into the world of Kathmandu Muslims. Secondly, it introduces the reader with some of the themes and issues which are developed in this thesis. Finally, the aim of this chapter is to show the different ways that Muslims negotiate their culture, religion and history.

2.1 A Kashmiri Family

The first family I stayed with was the Shah family. Theirs is a nuclear family which includes Mr and Mrs Shah, their 14 year-old daughter, Shahira, their 11 year-old son, Roshan. Mr Shah is a landlord; in addition to the building in which he lives, he also has properties in other parts of Kathmandu. The top two floors of his house are set aside for his family and he rents out the rest of the rooms on the first floor to a variety of tenants, including a water supply company, a computer shop and a language institute.

Life in the Shah household starts at about 4am, when Mr Shah wakes up to turn on the water pump on the ground floor. Kathmandu has an acute water problem, and water is only available at certain times of the day. Around same time, Mrs Shah would come silently into my room to turn on the electric water heater in the bathroom, so that I would not have to perform my ablutions for the morning prayer with cold water. She never wakes me up for prayer – she simply helps to prepare for it. When I enter the bathroom, there would be hot water, and there would be a wooden platform for me to stand on. “So that your feet would not touch the cold floor,” Mrs Shah explained when I asked her about it.

Breakfast is always a rushed affair, with the children running about the house preparing to go to school. Mr Shah would return from his morning walk

with groceries and the newspaper, and after the children are gone, we take our breakfast in the kitchen. After breakfast, Mrs Shah and I would begin preparing vegetables and meat for lunch. Mr Shah is often out, and often without our knowledge. We would only realize he is gone when a phonecall comes for him, or when we call out to him and he is not there. When I asked her where Mr Shah goes during the day, she would just shrug her shoulders and say, "Men are like that. They come and go as they like. There is no point asking them." Once, against Mrs Shah's advice, I asked Mr Shah where he had gone that day. "Outside," he replied vaguely, as Mrs Shah bent her head tried to hide her smile. The gender division is very clearly marked in the household. Mr Shah would often bring Roshan with him when he goes out, leaving Mrs Shah, Shahira and me at home. The three of us would often go up to the rooftop and peer over the balcony, watching other women like ourselves, sitting on their rooftops, chatting and watching the afternoon go by.

Mrs Shah is in her late thirties. Although she is tall and robust for a Nepalese woman, the word that comes to mind when I think of her is 'delicate'. It is in the way she spoons food onto my plate, the way she walks across the room, the way she speaks in that soft voice, even when she is scolding her children. I know little about her past –despite her gentle demeanour, she was extremely skilful in deflecting my questions about her family, her schooling, or any issue which might indicate her identity. Outside the Shah household, I heard rumours that Mrs Shah is a convert to Islam, but it was something I chose not to pursue. She seemed determined not to let me know anything about her, and somehow I felt obliged to stay within the boundary that she had drawn between us.

During my stay with the Shahs, Mrs Shah was not well. She often feels a chill that penetrates 'to the bones' and is plagued with headaches. Whenever she had a headache, I would accompany her as she rested in the living room. One such day, she closed her eyes and asked me to describe what London and Singapore are like. "They are free countries, aren't they?" she asked me. I asked her what she meant. "You can do whatever you like. Free country. Not like it is here. I mean, when I was a child, I was free. But not my daughter; she is fourteen

but she does not even like going downstairs to buy a packet of biscuits. When we go and buy clothes together, she does not even look at what I am showing her. She just wants to go home. Do you know why? Because here we are very strict. Girls do not go out on their own. When I was first got married, *dai* [Mr Shah] did all the shopping for me. I just stayed at home. Now it is not like that – I can go out on my own once in a while. But my daughter is following the old ways. She has been home so long she does not even want to go out. She goes to school and she comes back. She does not have friends, she does not even know how to go around Kathmandu.”

Shahira, Mrs Shah’s daughter, studies in a private English-medium school. This proved to be was a blessing to me, as I could ask for her help in translating whatever I did not understand. Like most Kashmiris, they speak a mixture of Urdu and Nepali at home. Shahira and I became close friends after discovering our common passion for Hindi films and music. Mrs Shah was very encouraged by this, and one day, Mrs Shah took me aside and whispered, “Bring my daughter with you when you do your research. Show her what Kathmandu is like. She doesn’t know.” To everyone’s surprise, Mr Shah gave permission for me to bring Shahira around Kathmandu. I was even allowed to bring her to Kirtipur, a city just outside Kathmandu, where we stayed overnight. Then, one evening, over dinner, Mrs Shah asked me to teach Shahira how to perform the five daily prayers. She explained, “It is better if you teach her. I am not strong, and I cannot perform it so well.” Most boys in Kathmandu learn how to pray by simply following their fathers for the Friday prayers. Others are taught by a *mulvi* (religious teacher) who is invited to their homes. However, for girls, prayers are usually taught at home by their mothers or senior female relatives. For some reason, Shahira was never taught to pray. I demonstrated the prayers to Shahira, and she would accompany me when I did my daily prayers, but did not perform them herself. When I asked Mrs Shah if she wants Shahira to pray with me, she said, “Let her just watch first. It is better not to force her. At least she knows the movements.”

2.1.1 History and Hierarchy

One lazy afternoon, as we sat on the rooftop, I asked Mrs Shah if she could tell me a bit about her family history. She looked startled and said that she will ask Mr Shah to explain it to me as she did not know much history. The next day, to my surprise, a group of elderly men came to the house and made their way to the rooftop balcony. Plastic chairs were arranged in a semi-circle and a bedsheet, tied to ropes on both ends, acted as a shield against the fierce afternoon sun. Mr Shah was unusually quiet, his eyes were kept low to the ground. He whispered to me, "These are my elder brothers. I have asked them to come so that you can ask your questions to them." His eldest brother sat authoritatively in the middle, his long white hair blending into his crisp white kurta. He smiled at me with betelnut stained teeth and said in a light feathery voice, "*Shodnus*" (Please Ask)." I requested him to tell me about the history of the Muslims of Kathmandu, I switched on my tape recorder and he began with the legend of Haji Mishkin Shah¹:

Nepal's first Muslim figure who came, whose tomb is now in the Kashmiri Taqiya, there is a legend about him, which I will tell you now. This occurred about 4-500 years ago, when it was King Malla's time. His name was Haji Mishkin Shah.

When Haji Mishkin Shah first came, there was nowhere for him to stay. So he laid down a deerskin and sat on it. At that time, the Malla Raja's... Pratap Malla was it? [prompted by his younger brother] Ah, Ratna Malla. During Ratna Malla's time, he came. Ratna Malla used to ride on a white elephant when he travelled and in the royal palace, that white elephant was usually kept in an enclosure. Now Haji Mishkin Shah's meditation was very powerful. There was a divine power within him. By that divine power, he was able to draw that white elephant to him and by merely looking at it, he reduced the animal to a small size. Then he covered the animal with a steel cup.

¹ There is also a Hindu version of the legend, in which the king's elephant had crushed a Brahmin child and the soul became an evil spirit which the Hindu priests were not able to exorcise. Muslim exorcists were invited to Kathmandu to exorcise the spirit, and upon their success, were given land in that area (Gaborieau 1977).

From the palace, the King's people were looking for the lost elephant. Everyone was asked, "Have you seen the King's white elephant?" Then they reached Haji Mishkin Shah. Although they spoke different languages, by Haji Mishkin Shah's divine power, he knew and understood well what they were saying. Having understood the question, Haji Mishkin Shah indicated, "It is there [under the cup]." Once they opened the cup, they saw the elephant, sitting under the small cup. They could not believe it. Then by the power of Haji Mishkin Shah's eyes, just by looking at the animal, he restored it to its original shape and size. The people were astonished.

Then they tried to take the elephant back, but the elephant would not get up. Why? Because it was still under the *rishimuni*'s power. Then the *rishimuni* said, "Get up, go!" and only then the elephant got up and left. This story, the present King knows.

After the King's journeys had ended, the elephant was brought to the enclosure and tied. But even when tied with a big rope, the elephant would not stay, but returned to Haji Mishkin Shah. People again looked for the elephant in the enclosure but it was gone. So they went to the *rishimuni*'s place and found the elephant there.

Finally the King himself came and asked, "Who is this *rishimuni* with the divine power?" When the King saw for himself the divine power of Haji Mishkin Shah, he asked him "How can I help you? What do you need?" To which Haji Mishkin Shah replied, "I do not need anything. I need a place to stay. To stay in the middle of the road is not suitable." The King said, "Whatever kind of place you need, where you need it, tell me. I will give you a big place." The *rishimuni* replied, "I do not need a big place. I will throw this piece of deerskin and where it lands, that area of land is enough." So he threw the deerskin from where the elephant was, and the deerskin fell a distance away. From there, there is a mosque and there is a big area that is given to Muslims.

Translated transcript of an interview in Nepali

While the eldest Shah spoke, the others would listen quietly, occasionally nodding their heads in agreement, and they would only speak when the eldest Shah asked them a question. Even when I addressed any of the other brothers for

their opinion, it was the eldest Shah who would answer on their behalf, and who acted as the final authority on what was to be written down or recorded on tape.

The actual transcript of the interview is much longer, but I have included the legend of Haji Mishkin Shah because of its centrality in Kashmiri historical narratives. This legend is uniquely Kashmiri in that it is hardly known among the non-Kashmiri Muslims. The Kashmiri Muslims consider themselves as beneficiaries as well as guardians of the legacy of Haji Mishkin Shah, whose tomb is located in the Kashmiri mosque. Mr Shah's eldest brother explained:

The facilities that are given to the Muslims by the Royal family are due to Haji Mishkin Shah and his nephew Khwaja Gyasuddin Shah. That is how Muslims, are able to build homes on the land, hold trust in the land. Through those relations, Muslims today are still living.

The land that Mr Shah was alluding to is the land that is held in trust by the Kashmiri mosque committee. This includes not only the immediate vicinity of the Kashmiri mosque, but also other properties that have been donated to the mosque by Muslims – *waqf*. At the time this research was carried out, the Kashmiri mosque also owned land in Putalisadak and Baneswor, which have been developed as commercial properties and rented out. It is the rental from these properties which sustain the Kashmiri mosque and its employees.

After the interview was over, Mr Shah told me that he had made an appointment for me to see his brother-in-law who is a Ph.D. holder. It was difficult to get Mr Shah to give me an interview: he would always excuse himself, choosing instead to introduce me to someone else whom he insists “knows more” or who is “more qualified”. I never understood why this was so, until I met a Kashmiri man, who explained to me that a Kashmiri will never speak out of turn, especially when there are others “above him” who are present.

Hierarchy is a leitmotif that runs in all aspects of Kashmiri life – one is ranked according to gender, seniority, qualification and sanctity. Mrs Shah could not have given me an interview – in this matter, she defers to Mr Shah. Mr Shah could not have given me one either, he is the youngest in his family and has to

defer to his eldest brother, who is ranked above him in terms of seniority, or his brother-in-law, who is above him in terms of academic qualifications. The issue of hierarchy also extends to their relationship with God. The Kashmiri Muslims believe that ordinary Muslims are not able to have direct contact with God. Only those who are 'pure' have such access, and purity of soul is obtained by acts of asceticism and devotion. Because of their closeness to God, these 'pure souls' act as mediators between man and God. The mediator *par excellence* is the Prophet Muhammad, whose birth and death anniversary is celebrated among Kashmiri Muslims with feasts and prayers of remembrance. A more immediate mediator is Haji Mishkin Shah, whose tomb is visited by devotees who circumambulate his tomb, light incense sticks and beseech him to expedite their prayers so that it will be fulfilled by God.

The Kashmiri Muslims are unique among the other groups of Muslims in that they are differentiated into Sufi orders or *tariqas*. For example, Mr Shah is affiliated to the Chishtiya order, named after Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, a well-known Sufi saint whose shrine in Ajmer (Rajasthan). There are also those who belong to international *tariqas* such as the Qadiriya, who observe the *urs* (death anniversary) of Abdul Qadir Zilani, a Sufi saint whose tomb is located in Baghdad. The *urs* of these saints are celebrated privately, rather than in the mosque. For example, for the *urs* of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, a small feast was held in Mr Shah's house, and only his close family members and friends were invited. Mr Shah is also known to make pilgrimages to Ajmer to attend the *urs*. What is interesting about the Kashmiri *tariqas* is that unlike other *tariqas* in the subcontinent, they are 'closed' in that they do not expand their numbers by recruiting new devotees or students in the Sufi tradition. When I was in Kathmandu, there were two or three Sufi 'practitioners',² but I knew of no one outside the Kashmiri circle who had taken *bai'at* [initiation] from them. Even among the Kashmiris themselves, there is a kind of unease when the subject of Sufism is brought up. "There are no Sufis here. We are all too busy filling our

² These were men who had devoted themselves to a life of meditation and prayer. Two of them are well known in Kathmandu as healers and exorcists, while the other is known for his ascetic lifestyle, which includes long periods of silence.

stomachs!" said a Kashmiri man. The *tariqas* that exist in Kathmandu are little more than social units, an issue that worried the Kashmiri elders. "We do not educate the young about our culture," lamented an elderly Kashmiri man. "How can we possibly compete with the other [Nepali] Muslims who have their own madrasah? After a few generations, I fear our culture will die."

2.2 A Tibetan Muslim family

Imran and his wife stay at the top of a four-storey building in Baghbazar. The first thing I noticed as I struggled up the stairs was loud barking from above. Imran's wife, Ruksana, greeted me at the door. She was dressed in a *shalwar kurta*, and around her neck was a string necklace with a few keys dangling low on her bosom. "Assalamualaikum!" she said with a wide smile and invited me in. After putting my bags aside, Ruksana gave me a short tour of her house. There are five rooms – three bedrooms, a kitchen and a living room - arranged around an open area where clothes are hung to dry. Imran and Ruksana have capitalized on their rooftop location and have placed a solar cooker, a round metallic dish about 2 metres in diameter, at the centre of the open area. A narrow flight of stairs leads up to the rooftop, where the dog lives. It was a large animal, not unlike a Saint Bernard, and it watched at me from the edge of the upper floor, occasionally growling when I came too close. "Are you afraid of dogs?" Ruksana asked when she saw me flinch. "No," I replied. "It's just that in my country, some Muslims consider keeping dogs as *haram* [forbidden in Islam]." "Oh, we keep it only for protection. It is not safe here in Kathmandu; there are lots of thieves. It is for necessity," said Ruksana rather defensively. "Don't worry, the dog won't bother you. We never allow it to come into the house. It lives up on the roof."

The first day I was there, Imran had summoned his brothers and their wives to his house to welcome me. Imran is the eldest of five siblings – four brothers and one sister - all of whom are living in Kathmandu. Two of his brothers live in the same building as he, while another lives no more than ten minutes away. His sister lives further away, about half an hour's walk from his house. Imran owns a hotel (which is adjacent to the building where he lives); one

of his brothers owns a travel agency, while his other two brothers are in the import-export business, specializing in clothing and fashion accessories. Imran does not speak much English – he did not have ‘much education’, he says. When I asked him to tell me about his family history, Imran made a telephone call to his younger brother and asked him to come to the house. “My brother studied until college level in Darjeeling. He had the best education. He can explain to you in English, it will be easier for you,” said Imran. So when his brother arrived, the three of us sat in the living room and Imran began to narrate his family history, in Nepali and Tibetan, while his brother translated.

Our family name is Siddique. It actually comes from India. Not all of my brothers use it. Tibet was taken over by China in 1959. Before the war, the Muslim traders used to pay tax to the Tibetan government. However, Muslim males are considered as foreigners. If a Tibetan woman were to marry a Muslim, then their male child would be considered as a foreigner. During the war, Nehru’s time, the Muslims declared themselves as Indian to escape from Tibet. They appealed to the Indian Council in Tibet. At that time, my father picked up the name Siddique.

When my family first left Lhasa, we settled in Kalimpong for a few months. This was in 1962. The Indian government wanted to know where we were going, and my father said told them, “Kashmir”. It was because of the high altitude and weather, which would match that of Tibet. Plus, it was a Muslim place, and my father was a very pious man. He wanted a good future for his children.

But life was difficult in Kashmir. We stayed in tents, and had trouble communicating with Kashmiris because of the language barrier. Doing business in Kashmir was also difficult, because the Kashmiris would demand that my father declare the real price of the goods he sold, and swear that on the Quran. If a person declares the real price of his goods, how can he do business? It is impossible! So my father sold some gold and decided to bring his family to Saudi Arabia. He thought that it is the true Muslim homeland.

We left on a ship from Bombay to Mecca with a few other Tibetan families. When we arrived, we could not understand the language and

had trouble with the visa application. The next day after our arrival, the police came and imprisoned my parents. We were all separated, and nobody knew what would become of us. In prison, someone told my father to declare himself as a Taiwanese citizen, because Taiwanese Muslims were given preference. But my father said that he had come all this way to escape from the Chinese, and he did not want anything more to do with them. Somehow, they were released and my family, reunited once more, got on a boat back to Bombay.

By that time, we were already low on funds. In Bombay, some Indian families took pity on us and helped us to write to the Indian government for some land. We managed to settle in the outskirts of Bombay, where my father and brothers built a tin shack. My father was adamant about not returning to Kashmir. So we moved back to Kalimpong. It was a nice area and we met some Nepalese. My mother and sister began to bake breads to sell in the mornings and evenings. In the daytime, we would stitch bags, saddles and leather. The business was doing well. Using these products, we would barter with the Bhutanese.

My sister didn't go to school at all. My eldest brother is very intelligent, and was top in his class in Lhasa. He was taught Tibetan language and the Quran, but he could not continue his studies. When we settled in Kalimpong, some of us were sent to the madrasah in Kalimpong, where we picked up Nepali, Urdu and Hindi. My eldest brother also went to school, but there was no one to help my father. So my eldest brother began to work and study at the same time. During the exam period, he would wake up at 2am, and study under the blanket with a torch. It was too hard for him, and he finally had to stop schooling. The government didn't give them any help. My other brother became a mechanic's apprentice. He was taught how to drive a jeep, and he began driving to Sikkim and other places, transporting goods and people.

In 1968, some people came and said that Nepal is a nice place, and that my family should consider moving there. My father and eldest brother made a trip to Kathmandu, where they met Abdullah, my then to-be brother-in-law. He was from a big Tibetan/Nepali family, and had a good reputation in Kathmandu. My father opened a shop for a few months. My eldest brother would come back, take some goods and

return to Kathmandu. So they went back and forth between Kalimpong and Kathmandu for a while. In 1969, my whole family moved here. My sister married Abdullah. She moved out and we all lived above our shop. At that time, it was in Asan. Then slowly, my eldest brother saved up money to buy land, and built this building. In 1984, the hotel was started. We also began to develop our own businesses. It is in our blood! But we are very close – my brothers will help me in all my business matters, and I will help them readily. Now that my parents are no more, we only have each other. We have some relatives still in Tibet and we are also close to them, but here, we are very united.

Imran's account of his family's life history is typical of the first-generation Tibetan Muslims, many of whom suffered dramatic upheavals in their lifetime. But Imran's family's case is slightly different because of the long distance that his family travelled to find a 'true Muslim homeland'. The experiences of Imran's family in the two 'homelands' - Kashmir and Mecca - taught them that they could not deny or abandon their Tibetan identity. In Kashmir, the linguistic barrier and the disagreements over business prompted them to leave. As Muslims, they searched for the ultimate homeland - Mecca - which again proved to be a disappointment as the linguistic barrier prevented them from even entering the country properly. As Eickelman et al. (1990) have noted, pilgrims who travel to the Holy land gain not only a knowledge of the external world, but also discover their local identity.

2.2.1 Life in a Tibetan Household

When I went to stay with Imran and Ruksana, it was wintertime in Kathmandu. The mornings were cold, with temperatures near zero degrees Celsius. At about 5 am, Ruksana would wake up to perform the morning prayers – we would sometimes meet in the dark open space, and she would ask, “*Namaz parnuhunchha?*” (Nepali: Are you going to pray?). After performing the morning prayers, Ruksana would switch on the television in the living room and tune it to Pakistan Television (PTV). In the early hours of the morning, PTV broadcasts

recitations from the Quran, and Ruksana would turn up the volume while she does her morning chores. An old Hindu washerwoman comes every morning to do the laundry, and Ruksana would prepare breakfast for her. We would joke that she is the real 'guest' because she is the one who eats first every morning. Imran occasionally makes breakfast for us before he goes out to the office. On those mornings, Ruksana and I would listen to him telling stories about his difficult childhood as we sat around the kitchen table and drank hot butter tea. Ruksana would look at him with a mixture of pride and embarrassment; pride that her husband is not ashamed to do 'women's work' and embarrassment that she is left with nothing to do.

Conversations at home are always in Tibetan. Ruksana, however, was an attentive host, and would periodically translate things for me into Nepali. Despite Ruksana's protests that I might find it bland, Imran insisted that I eat Tibetan food so that I will know what their culture is like. I was also given chopsticks to eat with, which caused some difficulty at mealtimes as I was used to eating with my right hand. Seeing my clumsiness, Ruksana asked, "Don't you use chopsticks in Singapore?" "No, we eat with our hands," I replied. "Oh, you look like a Tibetan, so we thought maybe you are a little bit like a Chinese Muslim. That is why I gave you the chopsticks," said Ruksana. After that conversation, Ruksana, being the natural diplomat, would put a pair of chopsticks and a set of fork and spoon for me during mealtimes.

Although three of the brothers stay in the same building, meals are usually cooked and eaten separately. The brothers would only eat together for special occasions, like Eid, or when a relative comes to visit. Otherwise, visits (especially when husbands are involved) are formal and usually arranged beforehand. The wives would visit each other informally – usually a phonecall is the only courtesy that they give each other before visiting. Although two of her sisters-in-law live a few floors below her, Ruksana is closest to Zubaida, Imran's first brother's wife, who lives ten minutes away. "We got married around the same time, and we are more matured than the younger ones," Ruksana explained. They also have children studying in Darjeeling – Ruksana's daughter is in a

convent school, while Zubaida's two sons are in a missionary school – and their conversations would usually revolve around them.

After breakfast, Ruksana would give the house a thorough cleaning. I asked her why she did not have a maid; they obviously could afford it. She replied, "Then what will I do? Sit around the house the whole day? A person can get sick doing nothing! I'd rather do work; it keeps me healthy and slim." Sometimes, Ruksana and I will go to the market to buy ingredients for lunch. Or if there is nothing to be done, we would go over to Zubaida's house for a chat. But we are always back in time to prepare lunch for Imran. "It is my duty to cook for my husband," Ruksana would say. "After all, I don't have to do any other work." The afternoons are usually quiet. After she has served Imran lunch and he has left for the office, I would find Ruksana doing aerobics silently in her bedroom (she is too shy to have the TV on loudly) or do administrative work for Imran's hotel business.

As Imran is the eldest in the family, Ruksana also has to serve the many relatives that visit her home. In addition, Imran sometimes arrives unannounced with guests or business clients. On one occasion, while we were munching Tibetan sweets in front of the television, we were startled by the doorbell and Imran's loud voice shouting, "Assalamualaikum!" He had brought three of his business clients up to the house. While Ruksana went to open the door, I quickly cleaned up the living room and ran to the kitchen to help prepare tea. Ruksana came into the kitchen, flustered. "Ah, you are making tea. You are just like a Tibetan. We have to serve our guests, we cannot just hide away here. Some people say that women should be in *purdah*, kept away from men. How can I help my husband and be in *purdah* at the same time?" she asked.

One day, while we were cleaning up after some guests, she asked me if I had ever read the *Bahishti Zewar*. "I have seen it before," I replied vaguely. Ruksana then said, "It is too difficult to follow – I don't like reading it at all. You can't do this, you can't do that. Did you know that women are not even supposed to serve male guests? It goes against our Tibetan culture. We have to be

hospitable. We have to treat our guests well. It does not suit us [Tibetans].” I asked her how she had got her copy of the Bashishti Zewar. “From one of my relatives. It is supposed to be good for women, but reading it makes me feel scared. Everything I do is wrong! Rather than read it and live in fear, I rather not read it at all,” she replied.

During my stay with Imran and Ruksana, I was awakened one night by the loud engine of a truck. The clock on the wall showed that it was 1am, and I quickly got out to see what the commotion was all about. I joined Ruksana on the balcony, where I could see 3 trucks unloading their goods in the courtyard below. Imran and his brothers were out in full force, shouting orders to the porters who carried the huge boxes and bags to the storeroom. “Our shipment from China has arrived,” said Ruksana. “Go back to sleep. Tomorrow, we will have lots to do.”

The next day, I walked into the living to find huge boxes which I thought were from shipment that was brought in the night before. “Those things are for the madrasah,” Imran said when I asked him what they were. “Each year, we have surplus items from our import-export business, and we give it all to the orphans at the madrasah. Shoes, jackets... it is winter and the children must be cold. This is our contribution to the Muslims here. We Tibetans may not spend time sitting around in the mosque, but when we help, we help in practical ways. When we give a promise, we keep to it. Not like some Muslims in the Nepali mosque who like to promise all sorts of things, but it is all words, no actions.”

2.3 A Nepali Muslim Family

Tahir’s house is in the heart of Indrachowk, the area known for its bead market, or Pote Bazaar as it is usually called by the locals. Tahir has a shop not far from his home. He sells beads in bulk, as well as sequins, ribbons and other decorative ornaments which are bought by the local tailors. His shop, which is a space not more than 3 meters by 3 meters is packed from floor to ceiling with small unmarked drawers whose contents only he and his sons (who tend the shop) know. There is just space for one person to sit behind a tiny counter that separates the shop from the busy pavement. It is here that Tahir spends most of his time.

He opens the shop at about nine o'clock in the morning and sits behind the counter until eight or nine at night. His day is punctuated by short prayer and meal breaks which he takes at home. These days, Tahir health is not so good – he calls it 'old age' sickness – and sometimes his sons take turns to sit in the shop.

To reach Tahir house, you have to go through a tiny numberless door along the main road. Houses and courtyards in Kathmandu are connected by a series of low alleyways which form an intricate network of passageways through the capital. In Tahir's case, to get to his house, you have to pass through a courtyard with an ancient water-pump, through another dark alley and then finally to the courtyard that he shares with five other households. His door, too, is numberless, indistinguishable from the other four doors that surround the dirty courtyard.

Tahir house has five floors. On the ground floor is a bathroom and storeroom. On the first floor is a room which is shared by his two youngest sons, aged 14 and 17. On the second floor is Tahir's bedroom-cum-sitting room. It is here that guests are invited for tea. On the third floor is his only daughter's room. The fourth floor is the kitchen and above that is his eldest son's bedroom and another bathroom. Then there is the rooftop, where clothes are washed and hung out to dry.

Tahir is the only Muslim house among the five that share the courtyard. The rest of the houses are occupied by Newars, the indigenous population of Kathmandu. There is a lot of friendly banter between Tahir house and that of his Newar neighbours. They do not need to meet at the courtyard; most of the chatting is done from their respective windows that are just a few metres from each other and look into each other's homes. They speak to each other in Newari, which, according to the neighbours, Tahir and his wife speak very well. "Pukka Newari. Just like the locals. No difference whatsoever." According to Tahir, "You have to know [Newari] if you are working in Kathmandu. I am a businessman and I have to do business with Newar people. So I learnt it from the time that I was small."

The second eldest son of a shopkeeper, Tahir was born in Chabahil, which is north-east of Kathmandu. He remembers his past as one of great strife. At the age of eighteen, he was sent to be a servant in another household. Then at the age of 21, he got married to Naseema, a girl of mixed Nepali-Kashmiri descent. For eight years, they were childless, then three sons and a daughter were born to them. During that time, Tahir saved money to buy a small car, and he became a taxi driver. With the money he earned, he was able to buy himself a small piece of land at Indrachowk, where he built his present house. He also started his bead and ornament shop and has been working there for the past fifteen years.

Tahir is worried for his sons. Tahir was complaining that he only has a small shop – how can possibly he divide it among his three sons? He was thinking of opening another shop for his eldest son, but that would mean taking out a loan, and his eldest son is not keen to be a shopkeeper like his father. He wants to go abroad to work, as he heard that the money is good. Even in this respect, Tahir is finding it hard to send his son abroad. His position at the mosque as a committee member counts for little with the employment agencies which specialize in the foreign employment market.

2.3.1 Performing Islam

On the first day that I was there, Naseema, Tahir wife asked me, “Have you prayed?” I said that I had, and then Naseema went on to ask how I performed my prayers. “*Dekhaunus* [Show me],” she said. I was surprised at the request, but somehow I felt that she was only being honest with what others must have wanted to ask me but never had the courage. I showed her each movement and the accompanying Arabic words that are to be said. Naseema watched me closely, her drawn arched eyebrows scrunched in concentration. When I had finished, she grabbed my cheeks with both hands and with a wide smile, said, “You know everything!” I remember feeling a sense of great relief that my Muslim identity had been validated.

The 10 days that I stayed in Tahir house was like a long-drawn examination of religious rules and practices. Naseema was an unrelenting quiz-

mistress, who, at the drop of a hat, would ask me for the religious rules on various things, such as food, clothing, and prayers. Most of the time, I passed her little tests. We quickly established some common ground – we uttered the same Arabic words in our prayers and we performed the same movements. We did ablutions the same way (I had to perform that too). But there were also times when I failed.

The first thing that she disagreed with was my mother's name. One day, while she was threading beads in the living room, she casually asked me what my mother's name was. "Lamah," I said, unaware of the drama that was to ensue. Naseema looked up, shook her head and said, "That is not a good name. That is a Hindu name." Then I realized that in Nepal, the word 'lama' is associated with Tibetan Buddhist monks. Naseema, like other Muslims in Kathmandu, does not distinguish between Hindus and Buddhists; non-Muslims are all considered as Hindus (with the exception of Christians). Naseema could not understand how my mother could have such a Hindu name, and she kept asking me if my mother is a convert to Islam, or whether my grandparents were converts. When I told her that they were not, she could not believe it. "If your mother is a Muslim, why doesn't she have a Muslim name?" she kept asking. I tried to give her the example of Muslim converts who do not change their name upon conversion but are nevertheless practising Muslims. "Isn't it the same thing? They are still Muslims," I suggested. To which Naseema gave a disdainful look and said, "They are not real Muslims if their names are not Muslim names." And it was then that Tahir stepped in and gave his opinion, "You know cars have got number plates, right? If you don't have the right number plate, how will people know who you really are?"

The issue of names was to disturb Naseema more than I ever imagined. On another day, she asked me what my brothers names were. "Azril and Affendi," I replied. She raised her already arched eyebrows and screeched in Urdu, "*Yeh kiya naam hai* (What kind of name is this?)" Then she began her lecture on what constitutes a good Muslim name. Ideally, the name has to come

from the Quran, or it not, it should be the names of well-regarded people in Islamic history. It appears as though my whole family has been named wrongly.

Naseema was also shocked to find out that I do not have a family name. “We are Khan,” she said. “What are you?” I told her that in Singapore, Muslims adopt the father’s first name, with the prefix ‘*bin*’ or ‘*binte*’ to indicate whether the person is a male or female. So there is no continuity of a family name to indicate one’s genealogy. In my limited Nepali, it came out roughly as “I do not have a family name, I follow my father’s first name.” Naseema seemed confused, until Tahir stepped in again and explained, “This is the Arabic style of names. ‘*Bin*’, ‘*binte*’, these are all Arabic styles.” This placated Naseema somewhat, but she still regarded me with a suspicious eye.

Of all the households I had stayed in, I cannot deny that Tahir house was by far, the most taxing and stressful. There was no way of telling what might spark off a scolding from Naseema. In that household, my Muslim identity was not a given; it had to be earned through performance and verbalization. It was not enough that I prayed in Naseema’s house. I had to show Naseema the whole process of preparing for and performing the prayers: how I did my ablutions, the bodily positions during the prayers and the verses from the Quran that I recited. As an anthropologist, I welcomed the criticism that I experienced at Tahir’s house because it provided me with invaluable insights into Nepali religious identity. But what I did not anticipate was how much the criticism affected me on a personal level. Naseema was not satisfied that we had our different ways and beliefs. Islam, to her, is her way or else one is not a real Muslim. When I started to take the things she said personally, I realized that subconsciously, I wanted to prove that I was a real Muslim. But the fact that I did not do as she said taught me who I was, and what, for me, defined Muslim identity. Religion is a personal issue –one could argue that the circumstances forced me to see it that way - and the more I protected my own personal beliefs, the more Naseema knew about me, the easier our relationship became.

This experience taught me how religious differences are managed. I was a stranger to Naseema, and therefore could not be given the relativism that is accorded by familiarity. For example, although Naseema would criticize my clothes as being un-Islamic, she allows her daughter to dress the same way without much fuss. When I pointed it out to her, she would shrug her shoulders and say, “She’s like that.” On another occasion, I noticed that her son does not perform the daily prayers. When I pointed it out, she said, “You can’t force these things. Religion has to come from the heart.” This from a woman who used to call me *alchi* (Nepali: lazy) for missing one prayer! I realized that with nothing but Islam as my calling card, I was setting myself up for such ‘tests’. Had I been anything other than Muslim, perhaps Naseema might not have shown such emphasis on religion during that initial period. She was asserting her Islamic identity by commenting on Islamic issues; as much as she was ‘testing’ me, it was also her way of making sure I knew how Islamic she was.

The two weeks I stayed with Naseema were the most challenging, but ironically also the most rewarding. Within a short period of time, I learnt about the centrality of prayers, names, appearance and halal food in her construction of Muslim identity. But I also learnt that while these are markers of identity; some are arbitrarily applied, especially the rules regarding appearance and prayer.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to introduce the Muslims of Kathmandu, or more specifically, the three Muslim families I stayed with. Some of the issues raised are particular to the ethnic or religious group to which these families belong. For example, the notion of hierarchy, history and saintly power is significant among the Kashmiris, while among the Tibetans the recurrent themes are of upheaval and migration. I have selected these episodes in order to show how differently these groups construct their Muslim identity during those initial few weeks.

Although the three families live no more than a fifteen-minute walk from each other, they have no social contact with one another. The Shah family stands

apart from the other two families in that they are Kashmiri Muslims and are affiliated to the Kashmiri mosque, while the other two (Tibetan and Nepali) are affiliated to the Nepali mosque. However, a common affiliation with a particular mosque is not necessarily grounds for a close relationship – the Tibetan and Nepali families are only vaguely aware of each other.

However, my 'sisters' from all three families were most keen to find out about each other, and I would act as the conduit through which information would pass from household to household. They were most interested in the kind of food I was given and the kind of lifestyle that I had in the different households. There were also the stereotypes each had of the other, although tact and diplomacy prevented them from clearly expressing them. For example, more than once, I was asked whether the Tibetan Muslims are "good at business" which, I learned is a euphemism for the stereotype of Tibetans as shrewd businessmen. I was often asked what kind of "good food" I was served at the Kashmiri household, which is based on the assumption that all Kashmiris are well-off.

The strength of cultural or ethnic identities among the various groups in Kathmandu reminds me of what Baumann has described as a 'community ... of faith' (1996: 125) in his study of Muslims in Southall. There, he was describing how the Muslims in Southall, who were from India, West Africa, Fiji and Somalia, were unable to overcome their cultural differences despite sharing a common religion. The case of the Kathmandu Muslims, however, is slightly different, as the subsequent chapters will show. Despite their strong cultural or ethnic identities, the Kathmandu Muslims have a strong sense of local (religious) identity. This, however, only emerges when their religious identity is challenged by Islamization (in the form of the Tablighi Jama'at) which is discussed in Chapter Seven. However, in order to understand the nature of their response to Islamization, we must deal with the history of Muslims in Kathmandu and their relationship with the Hindu state which provides the backdrop against which religious identity is defined.

CHAPTER THREE

History

The Malla Period

The earliest evidence of a formal relationship with the Muslim rulers in India dates back to the Malla period (1200-1482 AD). At that time, Nepal was divided into many small kingdoms or principalities. In the Gandaki region, west of the Kathmandu valley, were the Chaubise (twenty-four) principalities; in the Karnali region, in the far west of Nepal were the Baise (Twenty-two) principalities (Shaha 1996: 3). The Kathmandu Valley itself was divided into the three main kingdoms of Bhatgaon (Bhaktapur), Kantipur (Kathmandu) and Lalitpur (Patan), all of which were ruled by Malla kings. Relations between the kingdoms were rarely cordial; at times, rivalry between them resulted in attacks on each other's kingdoms, especially the settlements that lay outside the boundaries of the city (Shrestha et al. 1986: 48). To protect and defend their kingdoms, the Malla kings built high walls around their cities with several gates/watch-posts (Oldfield 1981: 195).

During the reign of King Anantamalla (reign 1274-1307 A.D.) he produced a coin which on the reverse bears the name Alā ud-dīn Khaljī written in Arabic. Alā ud-dīn Khaljī (1296-1316) was considered the most powerful sultan of Delhi, who successfully defended the country against the Mongols and led an invasion of southern India (Kulke and Rothermund 1998: 159). The coin suggests a form of suzerainty with Delhi that was brief and nominal (Slusser 1982: 68, D. Regmi 1965: 312-3). Later in the sixteenth century, Mahendramalla (1560-74) is said to have paid homage to the emperor Humayun of Delhi with gifts of swans and hawks. In return, the emperor gave Mahendramalla the right to mint coins in his own name which signified some kind of dependency on the Mughal court (Slusser 1982: 68).¹ The reason for these brief alliances with the Mughal court was clear: with frequent wars and political instability in the region, the Mallas, as well as the other rulers of the other kingdoms in Nepal, were keen to align

¹Slusser (1982: 68) notes that this event is doubted by Wright (1966: 140).

themselves with the powerful Mughals in the south. In doing so, they sought not only validation of their political power but also some measure of protection against possible attacks by the Mughals.

During the Malla period, there were two major incursions into Nepal by the Mughals. In 1324 A.D. Tirhut an influential Indian state which straddled what is now the Tarai and Bihar, was attacked by King Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq (1320-1324) as he was returning to Delhi after crushing a rebellion in Bengal. According to Siddika (1993: 103) King Harisimha of Tirhut had mistakenly thought that King Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq was going to attack his capital Simraongarh, and therefore decided to launch an offensive attack.² According to Muslim sources,³ King Harisimha was captured and brought back to Delhi. After the death of King Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq, his successor, Muhammad Tughluq (1324-1351) then reinstated King Harisimha as the King of Tirhut on condition that he pays a tribute to the Delhi King. However, in 1325 AD, upon hearing that that Sultan Muhammad Tughluq had plans to annex the Kingdom of Tirhut, King Harisimha fled with his family to Nepal (Petch 1984: 113-4). Tirhut then became a ward under Muslim rule, but was to secede to Brahman command after a mere quarter century.

The invasion of King Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq was significant to Nepalese history in two ways. Firstly, it drove King Harisimha and his family northwards to Nepal, where his widow later was to become a powerful figure in Valley affairs (Slusser 1982: 56). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for this analysis, the invasion also drove Maithilī Brahmins to settle in Nepal. The orthodox Maithilī Brahmins were renowned and prized for their learning and were accorded a higher status than the local Nepalese Brahmins by the Malla kings. Their influx into Nepal and influence over the Malla kings led to the intensification of orthodox Brahmanical practice in Nepal, the most significant being the transformation of the traditional social system into a codified hierarchical caste system.

²The source quoted for this is an article in Nepali entitled “Itihas Sansodhan ko Praman Pramey” part 1, Sansodahn Mandal, Kathmandu 2019, pp. 311-324.

³see Petch 1984: 114

The Kathmandu Valley itself was invaded in 1349 AD when Sultan Shams ud-dīn Ilyās of Bengal (1342-1357) led a week-long raid of the sacred temples of Nepal. There are two inscriptions, one in Swayambhunath and another in Patan, which stated the extent of the repair work that was done that the temples and statues that were destroyed by Sultan Shams ud-dīn Ilyās' army (Petch 1984: 125-126).⁴ The raid lasted no more than a week but Petch states that “the effect of the raid by the iconoclastic Muslims must have been appalling, far worse than the inroads by the Hindu chieftains of the hills, who usually at least respect the temples” (1984: 126). On the other hand, Slusser (1982) argues that the Muslim raid was not as significant as Petch (1984) had assumed. The Maithilī, who repeatedly raided the Valley during between 1097 and 1311, were described as “destructive and rapacious raiders who, despite their Hindu faith, did not spare even the temples from looting and burning” (Slusser 1982: 47). Rather than the result of a single Muslim raid, the destruction of the statues and temples were more likely caused by continued Mithilā attacks and natural disasters such as earthquakes and fires (Slusser 1982: 58).

However, the brief incursions into Nepal do not account for the influx of Muslims that occurred during the Malla period. During the reign of Ratnamalla (1484-1520), it was chronicled: “the *yavana*⁵ entered Nepal for the first time” (Gaborieau 1977: 31).⁶ In an attempt to capitalize on Kathmandu's strategic position in the trans-himalayan trade, Kashmiri Muslim traders were invited to Kathmandu by King Ratnamalla's envoy in Lhasa (Bista 1976: 150).⁷ At that time, Kashmiri Muslims were established traders who travelled between Kashmir and Lhasa through Ladakh, trading mainly in carpets, shawls and other woollen products. Trade, along with agriculture, had been the mainstay of Kathmandu

⁴ Slusser (1982) also mentions Pashupatinath being looted by the Muslims. Also see Vajracharya, Dhanavajra (1966) “Samasuddīnko ākramana (The Invasion of Shamsud-din) Purnimā 8, 2:4 (v.s. 2022 Māgha) p 6-13. Abridged, as “Shamshuddin's Invasion of Nepal” in *Regmi Research Series*, 2:3 (1970) p 65-66.

⁵ The term '*yavana*' is a Sanskrit term meaning “Greek”, which was applied to the Muslims.

⁶ Gaborieau (1977) warns that this evidence is not supported by any other document, and should be regarded with caution.

⁷ Muslims began settling in the region of Western and central Tibet as early as the twelfth century and the Kashmiri traders in particular, were a well-established presence in Lhasa. For a more detailed history, see Cabezón (1997: 17).

since the Licchavi period – since the opening of the Banepa-Kuti pass in 649 AD, trade relations were established between Kathmandu and Tibet (Shrestha et al 1986: 1986). In addition, the mountain passes of Kuti and Kerong, which are located north of Kathmandu, provided the shortest route between India and Tibet (Ansari 1993: 14). Nepal produced metal utensils, statues and paintings that were exported abroad, while goods that were brought in from India were re-exported to Tibet (Shrestha et al. 1986: 38-9). Kathmandu's position as a trading centre was further enhanced in the seventeenth century, when a treaty was signed between Kathmandu and Tibet which stipulated that Tibet should use no other route in its trade with India (Nepali 1963: 85).

The Kashmiri Muslims who accepted the King's invitation set up trading houses in Kathmandu, thereby establishing the first Muslim community in Nepal.⁸ According to Kashmiri oral history, the first mosque was built in Kathmandu under the reign of King Pratapmalla (1641 - 1674).⁹ The Kashmiri Taqia as it was called, still exists today at Ghantaghar. The Malla period also saw the arrival of other Muslims by invitation from various kings who required their specialized skills. The Mallas in particular, were deeply influenced by Mughal culture, especially Mughal art, architecture, weaponry, attire and language. According to Slusser (1982: 68), "the representations of Malla royalty in bronzes and paintings from mid-seventeenth century are indistinguishable from Mughal and Rājput models." In the early eighteenth century, King Mahindrasimha of Kathmandu (1700-1722 AD) invited Muslims to settle in his capital to serve as court musicians and to manufacture perfume and bangles (Slusser 1982: 69).

Persian and Arabic words were also incorporated into the local Newari language. For example, honorific titles such as '*hakima*', '*vakola*' and '*umarao*' were adopted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Slusser 1982: 69). Pratap Malla placed such a high value on Persian language that he included it in his inscription at Hanumandhoka, which still exists today. Persian was also the

⁸ In the early eighteenth century, Desideri, a Christian missionary who travelled to Nepal noted that there were shops and offices belonging to Kashmiri Muslims in the city of Kathmandu. Daniel Wright, who visited Nepal in 1875, mentioned that the Kashmiri Muslims had been established in Kathmandu for several generations (Wright 1966).

⁹ According to Siddika (1993:105) the Kashmiri mosque was established by a Muslim saint in 1524 AD but this is not supported by any historical evidence.

lingua franca for correspondence with the British, and for this purpose, Persian specialists were brought in from India to act as translators as well as language tutors for the Malla court.

Although professed Hindus, the Malla rulers were tolerant in their attitude towards non-Hindus. They not only worshipped Buddhist gods in addition to Hindu ones, but also participated in the building, maintenance and restoration Buddhist temples and *viharas*. The Malla rulers also granted freehold land to Christian missionaries, the Capuchins, who arrived in their realm during the eighteenth century (Slusser 1982: 74). In 1737, the Christian missionaries were given a “Decree of Liberty of Conscience”¹⁰ which stated:

We, Jaya Ranajita Malla, King of Bhatgaon [Bhaktapur], in virtue of the present document, grant to all European Fathers leave to preach, teach and draw to the religion the people to us subject, and we likewise, allow our subjects to embrace the Law of the European Fathers, without fear or molestation either from us or from those who rule in our kingdom. Nor shall the Fathers receive from us any annoyance, or be obstructed in their Ministry. All this, however, must be done without violence and of one’s own free will. (Quoted in Lindell 1997: 25)

The Muslims were also given leave to practice their religion by the Mallas.¹¹ Document I¹² which is written in Newari, and dated Nepal Samvat 857 (1737 AD) states:

Document I

In the Year of 857, the month of Jestha (June), on the date of the 5th day of the waxing moon, at that time the donor, Shah Ghasi Shah Kashmiri... on this side, in the name of Guru Miya Mahamar Aher, the God who enjoys in the delighted heaven, [gave] land of 1 *karkha* [equivalent to one quarter of a ropani]¹³ and 2 *cul* [a smaller fraction of a ropani] for the [purpose of] burying dead bodies. Whoever takes over

¹⁰ Lindell claims that King Jaya Prakash Malla of Kathmandu had also given such a decree to the Capuchins, in which it was stated that ‘no one should harass or harm those who, of their own free will, embrace the way of life professed by the Priests’ (1997: 26). It should be noted that Lindell did not quote his source, and this document has not been verified against other sources.

¹¹ In the analysis of historical records that follow, I have relied heavily on secondary material, especially the translated documents by Siddika (1993) and Gaborieau (1977).

¹² I have translated this, as well as other documents which follow into English.

¹³ One ropani is equal to 5,476 square feet

this land by greed [may] he [be cursed] with five grave sins of killing a Brahmin, killing a child or woman.

(Translated from Newari in Gaborieau 1977: 35-6)

This is the oldest document which verifies that a cemetery was built during the reign of Jaya Prakash Malla. However, it is not clear from the document if ownership of the land was actually transferred to another party; it merely states the intention of Shah Ghasi Shah Kashmiri to donate land in order to develop a cemetery in the name of Guru Miya Mahamer Aher. Their right to the land was also protected by law; any attempt to take over the land was equal to the murder of a Brahmin, which, according to Hindu law, is the most heinous of all crimes.

In another document written in Hindi, dated Saka Samvat 1660 (1738 AD),¹⁴ we get a glimpse of Muslim society as it existed at that time:

Document II

If the head worker of the Ghasi fakir community, Sufi fakir community, mosque or office of the Sufi fakir dies, or if a jewellery merchant dies, their unclaimed heir, property, profits and loss all should be transferred. Send my pure inheritance, after jagat¹⁵ and other [payments], to me. To each his own share. Whoever does not follow this he is [considered] a criminal. In my kingdom, one should not give alms to these people... On the Shake Era 1660, dated the 4th day on the 7th of waxing moon of Sravan (July) month abode at Kantipur [Kathmandu] city.

(Translated from Hindi in Gaborieau 1977: 36)

The above indicates two separate groups: the Ghasi fakir community and the Sufi fakir community. It is likely that the term 'Ghasi' refers to Shah Ghasi Shah, who, in Document I, had donated land for the purpose of building a cemetery. However, the meaning of the term 'Sufi' here is not clear. It is possible that it refers to the Sufi orders that may have come to Kathmandu at that time. It is also not clear whether the Ghasi and Sufi groups share a mosque and other property. Nevertheless, the document clearly shows that a mosque was already established in 1738. It also shows that the Malla state recognized Muslim

¹⁴ Gaborieau 1977: 36-7

¹⁵ 'Jagat' is an Arabic term which denotes the compulsory donation of wealth by Muslims

practices with regards to inheritance (such as *jagat*). At the same time, the fact that the document declares the King as the final recipient of unclaimed property suggests that some form of regulation was being exercised with regards to property transfer and inheritance.

Document III is actually dated after the Malla period, Bikram Samvat 1856 (1800 AD), but pertains to an event that occurred in 1758 AD. It tells of a court case whereby a man by the name of Dhaiju Newar claimed that his land was being occupied illegally by Muslims. The following is the translation by Siddika (1993: 117). The words in parentheses indicated where I have edited the text and added my own explanations for clarification:

Document III

[When] Jayaprakash Malla of Nepal fined Jagmohan, the great grandfather of Dhaiju Newar, twelve hundred Mahendra Malli Mohar,¹⁶ Jagmohan, fled to Patan. His 25 ropani land [at] Dhobi Khola Tukucha was confiscated by the King through Sankh Narayan Badan and later it was sold to Kashmiri Sidik Jib Gairah. Kashmiris had put dead bodies in this graveyard. [Today] it lies under a Guthi which [has existed for more than] 42 years. After the loss of the documents of the land, Dhaiju Newar claimed that [Kashmiris] had possessed his land without any validity. [After] deliberation [by] the court, [it is] decided that Dhaiju Newar's claim is false and without any foundation. The case is decided in favour of Kashmiris and [it is the order of the court that the land be used as before]. Sambat 1856 Asadh 12 Roj Subham (Siddika 1993: 117¹⁷)

The above document shows that 25 ropani of land at Dhobi Khola Tukucha was sold to a Kashmiri Muslim in the year 1758 AD. By 1800, the land (and presumably ownership of it) was under the Kashmiri Guthi (trust). If the Guthi had existed for over 42 years as specified in the document, it is likely that Sidik Jib Gairah had bought the land as a representative of the Kashmiri Guthi.

¹⁶ A '*Mahendra Malli Mohar*' is a silver currency that was coined by King Mahendra Malla (1560-1574 AD).

¹⁷ It is not clear whether Siddika (1993) translated the document from the original; she gave credit to Quraisha Banu who 'reported' it to her. The original document, she claims, is in the possession of Kamal Shah of Chhetrapati.

A comparison of Document III and Document I suggests that the area for the Muslim graveyard was developed in two stages: firstly in 1737 when Shah Ghasi Shah Kashmiri donated one *karkha* and 2 *cul* of land, and again in 1758 when Kashmiri Sidik Jib Gairah bought 25 ropani of land.

These documents establish that Muslims were in Kathmandu in the early eighteenth century. They also show the religious tolerance of the Malla kings, who allowed the Muslims to buy land, develop a mosque and cemetery. Religious tolerance under the Mallas is also extended to other non-Hindus, as in the case of the Capuchin priests who obtained land and protection for themselves by royal decree. However, the eighteenth century also marked the ascent of a powerful threat to the Malla reign in the Kathmandu Valley: Prithvi Narayan Shah, the ruler of the kingdom of Gorkha.

The Shah Period

In 1744, Prithvi Narayan Shah began a military campaign to unite the petty kingdoms under his rule. Historical documents show that he had three Muslim weapon specialists in his army who were originally from Lucknow (Gaborieau 1977: 93-4). They were especially prized for their knowledge of guns, which were new to Nepal at that time. In fact, matchlock rifles were only brought into Gorkha in 1744, when Prithvi Narayan Shah returned from pilgrimage to Varanasi (Shaha 1996: 26).

As the Gorkhali closed in on the city of Kathmandu, the Jayaprakash Malla, the Raja of Kathmandu (1736-1768) wrote to the agents of the East India Company in Betiah and Patna for help against the Gorkhali army (Shaha 1996: 33). In response, the British military expedition was dispatched in 1767 under Captain Kinloch to lift the siege by the Gorkhalis. However, the expedition was poorly prepared for the monsoon climate that befell them – lacking in supplies and personnel, they had a brief encounter with Prithvinarayan's forces in Sindhuli where they were defeated (Shaha 1996: 34).

The intercession of the British on behalf of the Kathmandu King led the Gorkhalis to suspect the Christian priests, who were also Europeans, of

complicity in the matter.¹⁸ When Prithvi Narayan Shah finally defeated the Malla king in 1769, the Catholic monks were accused of being foreign spies and were stripped of the land and privileges that were given to them by the Malla kings. The monks and the converted Nepali Christians were then expelled from the Valley, after which they fled to Chuhari, India (Slusser 1982: 77, Schreib 1989: 16).

In comparison to the Christians, historical records show that Prithvi Narayan Shah's policy towards the Muslims was ambivalent. On the one hand, he was aware of the important role played by the Kashmiri Muslims in the trans-himalayan trade. At the same time, he also suspected foreign traders, including the Kashmiri Muslims, of complicity in the British military invasion of 1767 (Shaha 1996: 38). As a result, the Muslims were allowed to stay, but restrictions were imposed upon the Kashmiri trading houses in Kathmandu. The treatment of Muslims is significant if we consider the fact that other traders, including Hindus,¹⁹ were expelled from Kathmandu.

The importance of the Muslims to Prithvi Narayan Shah is evident from the assurances that he gave to them concerning their property under his rule. a letter²⁰ to Sadu Khaji Mozamjik, a Kashmiri Muslim in Kathmandu, it was stated that:

Document IV

We [His Majesty Prithvi Narayan Shah] freed all your houses and land in Nepal since the first day of our de facto entrance and legal control. [It

¹⁸ Shaha (1996: 33) states that the Capuchin priests had fully endorsed the appeal by Jayaprakash Malla to the East India Company for help against the Gorkhalis. This is supported by Lindell (1997) who finds evidence that the Fathers wrote to the British seeking their assistance to save the Valley from the Gorkhalis. However, he states that the East India Company at that time was strongly against the presence of missionaries in their territories, and had dispatched the military campaign out of their economic interest in Kathmandu rather than to support the Capuchin priests.

¹⁹ This was the case of the Gosains, who were Hindu traders-cum-pilgrims from India (Shaha 1996: 38).

²⁰ I have my reservations about the date of this letter. According to Siddika (1993: 116) this letter was dated Bikram Sambat 1822 (1766 AD), which implies that it was written before Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest of the Kathmandu Valley in 1769. This is unlikely, given the fact that the letter clearly states that the conquest had already occurred, and therefore, I suspect that the date given by Siddika is wrong. Also, it should be noted that the translation was through a secondary source – Quraisha Banu – and therefore cannot be verified. The original letter is said to be in the hands of Biram Uddeen of Wotu tol.

should be borne in mind] that whatever will be fixed for all merchants the *salami* [tax] to pay the same will be paid accordingly. [We have freed your house and land]. Do not worry.

(Quoted from Siddika 1993: 116)

In Bikram Sambat 1851 (1795 AD), at the beginning of Rana Bahadur Shah's rule (1777-1799), the Muslims were once again assured of their right to own property and continue their religious practices:

Document VI

On this auspicious occasion, a decree of the Glorious His Majesty the King.

To: Sanualla Kashmiri. The border of the [mosque] land next to Ranipokhari [is defined thus]: to the east *hata* [half an arm's length] from the field, the main road to the west, *vaha* [1 arm-length] of land of the mosque to the north, a slant road to the south. The mosque [which is] within these four boundaries from the period of Nepal (Malla) has been used as a Dharmasala [lodging] by your father Mojamji, who was the rightful *mukhtiar* [minister and manager] of it. Today the rightful minister and manager of that land are reinstated upon you as it was before. With good faith, manage it according to the old tradition. The year of 1851, dated on the 1st day, on the 11th of waxing moon of Fagun (Feb-Mar) month abode at Kathmandu. Blessed.

(Translated from Nepali. Gaborieau 1977:38)

Despite Prithvi Narayan's initial suspicion of the Muslim traders, Documents V and VI show that the Shah kings recognized and supported the Muslim institutions that were in existence in Kathmandu.

The second half of the eighteenth century was punctuated by series of events that disrupted the flow of trade through Nepal. Firstly, the defeat of the 1767 military expedition by the East India Company by Prithvi Narayan Shah meant that trade between India and Tibet was severely affected as the British started to look to new routes that would bypass Nepal altogether. Secondly, in 1770, after a protracted dispute about various trade issues, Tibet closed off its trade routes to Nepal and Nepal-Tibet trade "virtually came to a standstill" (Shaha 1996: 39).

Prithvi Narayan Shah's trade policies also proved detrimental to the livelihood of the local traders. In an attempt to control the flow of trade through Kathmandu, he closed off the trade routes to Tibet in the east and west. He sought to control trade by establishing 'trade marts' (Shaha 1996: 38) whereby goods from India and Tibet would be sold to Nepali traders, who alone are authorized to re-export the goods. This was expressed in a letter dated Bikram Samvat 1884 (1828 AD):

Ahamad Ali Kasmiri, previously, [I was told that] you had a trade of foodstuff from your business centre. Later other Kashmiris and other merchants brought them from *madhesi* [India] and took it to *bhot* [Tibet]. From now on, following the old agreement paper you yourself should bring them from India and also take it to Tibet. If someone else brings or takes them report it to us. I ordered with the condition that those goods should be auctioned and they should be punished. With your good faith you should trade for generations and beyond. On Sambat 1884, dated on the 3rd day, 11th of waning moon of Jestha (June) month. Blessed.

Translated from Nepali (Gaborieau 1977: 44)

These measures, coupled with the adverse trade relations with India and Tibet, proved unpopular with local as well as foreign traders, and led to the exodus of some Kashmiri Muslim traders from the Valley (Siddika 1993: 111). By 1774, there were only two Kashmiri trading houses were in Kathmandu (Shaha 1996: 38). The strategic position of Kathmandu in the trade with Tibet also waned as new routes to Tibet were opened which bypassed Kathmandu altogether (Shrestha et al. 1986: 75).

However, trade in Nepal received a boost in 1816 when the Sugauli Treaty was signed, terminating hostilities between Nepal and the East India Company. This meant that merchants had full access to enter and trade in Nepal, the local traders' market for exports expanded and they were able to import goods from abroad.

In 1854 AD the Muslims were officially integrated into Hindu society with the promulgation of the Muluki Ain (MA), under the auspices of King Surendra Bikram Shah and Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana (see chapter 4).

The Muluki Ain, itself an impressive exercise in social organization, included all groups (all ethnic groups, natives and foreigners, Hindus and non-Hindus) in the hills and the Kathmandu Valley. Muslims, together with *Mlecchas* (Europeans) were placed in the category of *pāni nacalnyā choi chiṭo hālnunaparnyā* (Water Unacceptable but Impure).

The 1857 Rebellion

A large influx of Muslims occurred in the aftermath of the 1857 Mutiny in India. Although Jang Bahadur's policy was to help the British quell the mutiny by deploying Gorkha troops to the troubled areas, he also granted asylum to the leaders of the Mutiny such as Peshwa Nana Sahib, Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly and Beni Madho. According to Shaha (1996: 256), aside from providing asylum based on humanitarian reasons, Jang Bahadur was lured by the prospect of acquiring a share in the wealth that the refugees were reported to have brought with them. While the refugees were granted asylum in Nepal, Jang Bahadur showed his cunning in declaring to the British that the refugees were not traceable.

As a reward for Nepal's assistance in quashing the rebellion, a section of Oudh was annexed to Nepal, which includes what is today Rautahat, Bara and Parsa in the Tarai. This led to a sudden increase in the Muslim population of Nepal, as Muslims who were living on the seceded land found themselves Nepalese citizens.

In terms of Nepalese Muslim history, one of the most important refugees was Begum Hazrat Mahal, wife of Nawab Wazid Ali Shah of Oudh, who, according to oral history, was said to have brought with her 28 attendants as well as gold and silver upon 88 horses. Although she was given a pardon by the British, she remained in Kathmandu where she died. Today, her tomb lies at the corner of Bagbazar next to the Nepali Jame mosque.

Begum Hazrat Mahal is an integral part of Kathmandu Muslim history because of her role in the establishment of what is today the Nepali Jame mosque. There are two theories surrounding the history of the Nepali Jame mosque which

was once called Shi'a Imambara (Shi'a mosque). The first theory states that Begum Hazrat Mahal and her entourage were Shi'a, and they were given land to build a mosque during the reign of Surendra Bikram (1847-1881). According to oral history, the Shi'as were later converted to Sunni Islam by a religious leader called Maulana Razali and the mosque was changed to a Sunni mosque with the name Hindustani Takia some time during the later half of the nineteenth century.

Sharma (1994), however, dates the arrival of Shia Muslims much earlier, during the reign of Pratap Malla (1641-1674). According to his theory, when Begum Hazrat Mahal arrived in Kathmandu, among her entourage was Maulana Sargarz Ali Shah, the mufti of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. According to him, it was Maulana Sargarz Ali Shah who converted the Shi'as to Sunni Muslims (Sharma 1994: 36).

The documents analyzed in this chapter, the earliest of which dates back to the eighteenth century, indicate only one mosque, the Kashmiri Taqia. If the Shi'as were already established in the seventeenth century, one would imagine that this would be reflected in the historical documents in the eighteenth century. However, the fact remains that Begum Hazrat Mahal and her entourage was Shi'a. How and when they converted to Sunni Islam, and how the Nepali Jame mosque became Sunni can only be speculated, but it is reasonable to suppose that it occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century. There are no Shi'as left in Kathmandu today and very few are aware of the Shi'a origins of the Nepali mosque.

Muslims Under the Ranas (1846-1951)

During the Rana period, caste prohibitions on intermixing between the high and low castes meant that Muslim children were not allowed to attend state schools. The more affluent Muslims sent their children to India for their education. In the 1940's, the Rana government relented to Muslim demands for equal opportunity in education and the first Muslim students were given places in state schools (Ansari 1981: 32). In 1940, the first Muslim school was also opened in Kathmandu by Maulana Hayat Hussain Nadawi, who was also the Imam for the Nepali Jame Mosque. The school was named 'Madrasah Islamiya' and its curriculum included both religious as well as secular subjects.

The Rana period was marked by the construction of elaborate palaces and stately buildings in Kathmandu. In order to make way for these developments, part of the land which was bought by the Muslims during the Malla period was reclaimed by the government. Prime Minister Bir Shumshere (1885-1901) banned further Muslim burials in the area and in compensation, land was given at Swayambhu for a Muslim cemetery (Ansari 1981: 37).

If we consider the current location of the two mosques along Ghantaghar, we can see that it is separated by the building which houses the Clock Tower and part of the Trichandra campus. According to Muslim oral history, Muslim land once stretched from Jamal to the junction of Baghbazar, and that the division occurred during the time of Bir Shumshere. If the clock tower was built in 1894 AD, this would mean that the division of land occurred in the late nineteenth century.

However, the division was not only between the government and the Muslims; divisions were also occurring within the Muslim community, as symbolized by the two mosques on opposite sides of Ghantaghar. Differences between the two mosques also found its way into the courts: land that was given at Swayambhu had to be legally divided into two: six annas for the Kashmiris and ten annas for the Nepalis. In 1892 AD or (1949 BS) a Nepali Muslim was buried on the Kashmiri side of the cemetery.²¹ It is rumoured that it was done intentionally so as to gain more land for the Nepali Muslims. The matter was brought to court where it was found that the man responsible for the burial was Ilahi Baksh, a horse trainer. When the government found out that he was responsible for the burial, his services were terminated and he was driven out of Kathmandu.

Muslims under the Panchayat System (1951-1990)

The 1960's saw the final wave of Muslims arriving in Nepal as Tibetan Muslims fled the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. According to oral history, there were already a few Tibetan Muslim households in Kathmandu prior to

²¹ Oral account of this court case was given by Syed Uddin, a Kashmiri Muslim.

1960, although the numbers steadily grew as the political refugees arrived from Tibet. The lodge at the Kashmiri mosque -- which is today the row of shops adjacent to the Kashmiri mosque -- became a refuge for most Tibetan Muslims. As the Tibetan Muslims began to rebuild their lives in Kathmandu, they eventually moved out of the lodge into the neighbouring areas, such as Baghbazar and Asan where there is a concentration of Tibetan Muslim homes and businesses.

The years under the Rana period did not diminish the Muslims' loyalty to the King, who was a virtual prisoner of the Ranas. In opposition to the Ranas, a handful of Muslims began to participate in various movements calling for democracy and the reinstatement of the monarchy. The Muslims were not spared in the Rana crackdown on their political opponents: in 1948, Naymuddin, a Kashmiri Muslim and a Praja Parishad (pro-democracy) activist was imprisoned for almost two years. The overthrow of the Ranas in 1951 marked a new period of optimism and mobilization among the Muslims of Nepal. In 1953, a meeting was organized to establish an association of Muslims of Kathmandu. Two separate groups emerged from the meeting: the Anjuman Islah and the Jamate Itihad. A few days later, the two groups agreed to unite and the All Nepal Anjuman Islah (ANAI) was formed, headed by Ahmaddin, a prominent member of the Kashmiri Muslim community in Kathmandu.

The ANAI operated with the blessings of the Royal Palace; messages of felicitations from the King graced their conferences, while senior politicians inaugurated them. Credit for the developments in Muslim society is often given to Ahmaddin, whose close relationship with the Royal Palace enabled him to influence policy makers to decide in favour of the Muslims. Among the most significant contributions made by the ANAI to Muslim society in Nepal was the provision of immigration facilities for Haj pilgrims from Nepal in 1965 (Ansari n.d.).²²

²² Prior to 2021 V.S. (1964-5 A.D.), Nepalese Muslims who intend to go for Haj had to obtain their passports and foreign exchange from India. After 1965, the Nepalese government took over control of the Haj, and began issuing Nepalese passports and enabling Nepalese Muslims to convert foreign currency for the purpose of pilgrimage. In 1966, the Haj Committee was formed under the auspices of the Home Ministry to oversee the annual pilgrimage. (Ansari n.d.: 31)

Under the Panchayat system, Ahmaddin, was nominated into the Upper House by King Mahendra, while Dr Mohammad Mohsin was nominated as a member of the National Constitution Amendment Commission by King Birendra in 1979. However, the ANAI could not survive the internal conflicts that plagued the organization. It was split over issues such as the distribution of Muslim property and regulations over the establishment of mosques and madrasahs in Nepal. The ANAI was dissolved in 1979. In its place, smaller organizations emerged, their numbers an indication of the fissures that existed in Muslim society and the failure of the ANAI to unite the disparate interests of the heterogeneous Muslim population.

One of the main issues was that of control over Muslim property: although differences already existed between the two mosques, it took the reclamation of Muslim land by the Ranas to force the differences to come to the forefront. The arguments²³ were couched in the language of orthodoxy -- the Kashmiri Muslims practised saint veneration while the Nepali Muslims did not -- and the physical expression of that dichotomy was the split of Muslim land into Kashmiri and Nepali parts. Although it was not explicitly mentioned by my informants, another issue seems to be that of the hierarchies of power within Muslim society. The Kashmiri Muslims, by virtue of being the oldest Muslim inhabitants of the Valley and the ones with established connections to the Royal Palace, naturally assumed leadership of Muslim society. This was resented by those who were later arrivals to Nepal who also wanted their say in the leadership. Ahmaddin, who was interviewed just before the dissolution of the ANAI had commented that there were 'some people who wanted to destroy everything' (Ansari n.d.). In a private interview, Ansari had described how Ahmaddin had tried to reconcile the Nepali and Kashmiri groups who were fighting for control over Muslim land, and that he had to concede to their demands for legal separation as the only way out of the power struggle.

The dissolution of the ANAI led to the rise of new groups, each purporting to serve the Muslim population through various upliftment

²³ These are based on oral history gathered from interviews with Muslims of Kathmandu, which included Muslims from all the abovementioned groups.

programmes. In 1971, the Millate Islamia (MI) was established, one of the more prominent groups still operating in Kathmandu today. With the financial support of foreign Muslim organizations such as the International Islamic Federation of Students Organization of Kuwait, it started an Islamic library in Kathmandu and launched a program to translate Islamic texts into Nepali. Another group, the Muslim Sewa Samiti (MSS) was established in 1974, and had, among its aims, to educate and improve the economic condition of Nepalese Muslims. To this end, it arranged for 105 Nepalese Muslims to work in Saudi Arabia and 25 students to pursue their education in the Middle East.

A prominent feature of these groups is the absence of Kashmiri Muslims. The composition of the members, gathered from meetings with the Milate Islamia and its sister organization, the Islami Yuva Sangh (IYS), is a mix of Hill, Taraian, Nepali and Tibetan Muslims. It appears that the physical separation between Kashmiri and Nepali groups also extends to their social organization and the kind of help that is available to each group. However, whatever the internal conflicts within the Muslim community, the Kashmiris and Nepalis are united in one aspect: they were portrayed in the press for being unanimously in support of the Panchayat regime. In 1980, the Nepalese Muslim Conference was held in Patan which was attended by over 300 delegates. The delegates showed their support for the King and the Panchayat system, which was picked up by the media (Regmi 1980: 302).

The ANAI also began documenting incidents of religious conflict between Muslims and Hindus, which were published in a bulletin in 1980. There were twelve separate incidents in various parts of Nepal from 1954-1977, the most violent being the riot that took place in 1971 in the districts of Bara and Rautahat in the Tarai. The incident was sparked off by a rumour that a cow was slaughtered by a Muslim in a village called Bhusaha in Rautahat. As a result, anarchy reigned in the districts of Rautahat and neighbouring Bara for twelve days. By the time order was finally restored on 28 Aswin 2028 V.S. (September 1971), a total of 51 lives had been lost and 6.4 million rupees worth of property was destroyed (Dastider 2000). The incident is also well remembered among the Muslims for the personal visit of King Mahendra to the affected districts. The

King's involvement in the crisis is deeply imprinted in the minds of Muslims, and remains, till today, the argument they most frequently cite for the restoration of monarchical rule in Nepal.

Thus it came as no surprise that in the 1979 Referendum, the Muslims voted unanimously for the Panchayat system rather than the multi-party system. In the 1981 elections, twenty-one Muslims contested the election to the Rastriya Panchayat, out of which only two were elected. One was Muhammed Islam Ansari from Mottahari district and the other was Sheikh Serajul from the Rautahat district. The fact that Muslims in these districts constituted 10.9 and 14.16 per cent of the total district population respectively suggests that Muslim candidates were able to garner support from the non-Muslim population.

The strategy of Muslims under the multi-party system has been to spread Muslim support for various parties so as to ensure Muslim representation in government, regardless of which party wins. This could be seen as political strategy of a minority population who are unable to sway the majority to their favour. It is also the most unobtrusive way to ensure representation in government – to align themselves with any one party could prove detrimental to themselves and the party involved. But the Muslims are not immune to the disillusionment faced by many Nepalese over the failures of the multi-party system. As noted by Dastider (2000), in the 1994 elections, the fielding of a Muslim candidate in areas where there is a high concentration of Muslims is no guarantee of electoral victory. It is often believed that the lack of employment opportunities and disillusionment with the electoral process is a harbinger of religious fundamentalism, the other marker of identity and power. To what extent this is true is yet to be seen, but the signs are already there.

In 1998, the Madrasah Committee was established to bring the curriculum of madrasahs in line with the national education curriculum. The move was initiated by the All Nepal Muslim Ettehad Association (ANMEA), who wanted to ensure that the graduates of madrasahs were integrated into the state education system. However, there was another motive behind the establishment of the Madrasah Committee – to expedite and monitor the foreign funds that are flowing into Nepal. Hamid Ansari, one of the leaders of the ANMEA commented that

there was growing concern among the Hindus about the number of madrasahs in the Tarai, with fears that the madrasahs are hotbeds for Muslim fundamentalists. According to Mehboob Shah, a member of the Madrasah Committee, it was a tactical move to legitimize the madrasahs while at the same time, ensure that the Muslims would not be marginalized by their educational curriculum. Under the new system, any donation from abroad has to go through the Madrasah Committee, who will ensure that the funds will be properly managed. The madrasahs who register with the Madrasah Committee are promised financial help by the government. Hamid Ansari also commented that foreign donors were getting disillusioned with the lack of transparency in Nepal as there was no way of ascertaining if the Muslim organizations who approach them are genuine. By establishing the Madrasah Committee, only those which are registered with the government will be given financial support.

In Kathmandu, there is only one madrasah – the Madrasah Islamiya at the Nepali Jame Mosque - which is affected by this new development. When I returned in 2000, they had already registered themselves with the Ministry of Education in order to gain official recognition for their educational system. The headmaster of the madrasah said that it was done with the aim of ensuring that the Muslims can be incorporated into mainstream society after graduation. However, not all I spoke to welcomed the idea of having to register with the government. One madrasah teacher from Patan (outside Kathmandu) questioned the efficacy of donations when it has to go through official channels. He cited the fact that the Madrasah Committee had more non-Muslim members than Muslim ones²⁴ and that it was a way of controlling Muslim development rather than promoting it.

Conclusion

The history of Muslims in Nepal is essentially a study of the relationship between a Hindu state and a religious minority.

During the Malla period, Muslims, whose skills in trade, artillery and language were needed by the state, were invited to Nepal and encouraged to stay.

²⁴ According to Mehboob Shah, there are 4 Muslim members and 7 non-Muslim members.

Historical documents show that under the patronage of the state, the Muslims were allowed to buy land and practise their religion. At the same time, there was the threat of invasion by the Mughals in the south, as the two incursions in 1324 and 1349 A.D. clearly showed. This, together with internal political instability led the Malla kings to brief and nominal periods of suzerainty with the Mughals in the south. The Malla period is often portrayed as a period of tolerance in Muslim oral history – but this tolerance should be regarded within the context of Mughal military power and the desire of the Mallas to harness Muslim skills for their own purposes.

Under the Shah rulers, however, the relationship between the state and the Muslims became more clearly defined. When Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered the valley, he expelled Christian missionaries and Hindu traders from the Kathmandu Valley but allowed the Muslims to stay and even gave written assurances that their land would not be confiscated. This was later upheld by Rana Bahadur Shah, who also guaranteed the rights of Muslims to hold property and practise their religion. However, the ‘tolerance’ that was enjoyed during the Malla period becomes clear from the Muluki Ain, which placed the Muslims at a low position in the caste hierarchy. This clearly indicated that although the Muslims may have been valued for their skills, they were lowly regarded by the Hindu state.

The Ranas were also ambivalent in their treatment of Muslims. During the 1857 Rebellion in India, Jang Bahadur sent his troops to help the British, but at the same time, he granted asylum to the leaders of the rebellion. In Kathmandu, however, the Rana period is most remembered for the confiscation of Muslim land by Bir Shumshere and the relocation of the Muslim cemetery at Swayambhu on land that was given in compensation by the state. It is also remembered for the official division between Nepali and Kashmiri Muslims, as evidenced from the partition of the cemetery land at Swayambhu.

Despite their subjugation by the Hindu state, the Muslims maintained their loyalty to the King, under whose patronage they felt the most secure. When the Ranas were overthrown in 1951, the Muslims showed their support for the King Tribhuvan and entered the Panchayat era by setting up the first Muslim

organization in Nepal, the All Nepal Anjuman Islah. The successor to King Tribhuvan, King Mahendra showed his support for the Muslims by endorsing the ANAI. The post-Rana period was also marked by communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims in various parts of the Tarai. The Hindu state showed it self to be an impartial adjudicator – not only did the Muslims receive compensation for the loss of life and property, but most significantly, the personal intervention of King Mahendra in the aftermath of the 1971 riots gained him the loyalty of the Muslims, who till this day speak reverently of him as the monarch who protected the Muslims against the Hindu fundamentalists.

In 1990, with the overthrow of the Panchayat system and the introduction of the multi-party politics, the Muslims changed their political strategy. They placed representatives in all the major political parties in a bid to spread their bets and ensure representation in politics whichever party is in power. The election of Dr Mohammad Mohsin as the Chairman of the National Assembly in August 1999 is testament to the success of Muslim involvement in multi-party politics. In spite of this, the loyalty of the Muslims to the King remains unchanged. This is clearly evident in a recent article in the *Weekly Telegraph* dated February 21st 2001. In his suggestion to resolve a stalemate in parliament, Dr Mohammad Mohsin concluded that ‘the ailments that have gripped the nation of late demanded [the] constitutional monarch’s due role in controlling the situation.’ When one considers the historical relationship between the monarchy and the Muslims, Dr Mohammad Mohsin’s suggestion does not come as a total surprise. It is, in fact, in keeping with the Muslims’ regard for monarchy as the final authority in Nepal, as well as a strategy to ally themselves with the monarchy in an uncertain political climate.

CHAPTER FOUR

Muslims in a Caste Hierarchy

This chapter takes a closer look at the position of Muslims in the Muluki Ain, the Hindu social hierarchy that defined Nepalese society for over a century (1854-1964).

Introduction

Although there are many studies that deal with the issue of caste in Islam, there are relatively few studies on the position of Muslims in a Hindu caste hierarchy. Religious conversion and the rise of communalism in India have blurred the distinction between Muslims as a religious category and as a caste. Caste identity, which proved resilient to religious conversion, meant that while the religious composition of caste may have changed, the structure remained more or less intact. This was especially so in the case of low-caste Hindus, who converted to Islam *en masse*, thereby conflating the identity of Muslims with that of low caste (Searle-Chatterjee 1994). This was to have a strong impact on the study of communalism, as religion began to cloud the issue of caste which was just as precipitous to social violence.

One of the few studies of Hindu-Muslim caste relations is by Madan (1995). The study is set in rural Kashmir, where Muslims are the majority population and the Hindus, the minority, consist of two Brahman sub-castes who are locally called Pandits. Traditionally, the Brahman are forbidden to perform certain tasks such as barbering and washing clothes, but the lack of other Hindu castes in the area has forced the Pandits to depend on the Muslims to perform these tasks. The Pandits consider the Muslims in principle to be ritually impure which means that they do not accept cooked food by Muslims and physical contact between them is limited to the Muslim higher castes. However, there are certain duties that the Pandit simply cannot perform because of the impurity it entails. For example, due to a lack of Hindu barbers, these duties, by necessity,

have to be performed by the Muslim barber, the Navid. The Pandits enter into ritual relationships with the Navids despite the latter being a source of pollution because ‘the danger emanating from Muslims can be controlled and rectified’ (Madan 1995: 268) compared with the serious and lasting impurity that would befall the Pandit if the ritual role of the barber is not carried out.

Referring to the relationship between the Pandits and the Muslims, Madan concludes that the case of rural Kashmir illustrates that “castes in a ‘Hindu’ society, other than Brahmans, are not necessarily “Hindu” in religion” (Madan 1995: 277). While the study by Madan is interesting in showing how caste (or caste-like) relationships can exist between two different religious groups, it does not really show the place of Muslims in a Hindu caste hierarchy because of the lack of other Hindu castes in the area.

This is where the caste hierarchy of Nepal is significant; it was one of tools for integrating a Hindu kingdom that has an ethnically and religiously diverse population. This chapter is in two parts. The first looks at the position of Muslims in the caste hierarchy and discusses its significance in terms of relationship between Muslims and Hindus. The second part analyzes the contemporary Muslim discourse on caste and looks at the ways in which caste is linked to contemporary Muslim identity.

Muslims in a Caste Hierarchy

In 1854, Nepal codified a ‘universal caste hierarchy,’ which incorporated Hindus and non-Hindus, natives and foreigners¹ within a single framework in its Civil Code or Muluki Ain (Höfer 1979: 151). For more than a century, Muslims in Nepal were considered as a caste group, and relations with them were governed by rules about contact through *bhāt* (cooked rice), water and sexual relations. The Muslims are placed in the ‘Impure but Water Unacceptable’ category, which, by

definition, means that they are people from whom water is not acceptable, but whose touch is not polluting. This category is low in the hierarchy (see Table 1), but not as low as the Untouchables, from whose hands water is not acceptable and whose touch is polluting. Considering the fact that Muslims consume beef (which violates the Hindu belief in the sacredness of the cow), the position of Muslims above the Hindu Untouchables seems contradictory to Hindu laws that govern ritual purity.

If we consider the case of Muslims in India, however, the position of Muslims in the caste hierarchy in Nepal is not as anomalous as it appears. In India, Muslims also occupied “a superior position in society than that which would have resulted from the application of Hindu values alone” (Dumont 1980: 206). There are two approaches in explaining this phenomenon. According to Dumont (1980) and Orenstein (1965), the Muslims were raised in the hierarchy because Hindu values of ritual purity were counterbalanced by Muslim political force.² However, this hypothesis does not hold true in the case of Nepal where Muslims have never held political power. This leads Gaborieau (1995) to reject the explanation by Orenstein and Dumont and suggest a ‘simpler’ hypothesis that the rank given to Muslims is the “traditional and normal rank of Muslims and generally of the *mleccha* in Hindu society” (1995: 227-8).

Gaborieau’s (1995) theory is the latest, and is based on the *dharmashastras* (Hindu religious law) where the term ‘*mleccha*’ is used to designate all who do not share Hindu culture. According to Gaborieau (1995), the *dharmashastras*, which predate the arrival of the Muslims, assigns the *mlechha* with an impure rank in the caste hierarchy. Quoting Hodgson (1880), Gaborieau (1995: 218-9) argues that since the Muslims fit into the category of ‘*mleccha*’, their

¹ However, it should be noted that the hierarchy only applies to the hill and high zones and excludes the Tarai region, implying that in 1854 the Rana rulers thought that only the hill and high zones needed to be integrated, and that the Tarai was not part of the same country even though it was under their control.

² There is also an interesting parallel with Kshatriyas who rank higher than they would according to a strict application of the principles of purity and for exactly the same reason - they are holders of power.

ranking in the hierarchy is already predefined and therefore should be taken as the norm rather than an exception.

The analysis of the Muluki Ain is limited by the fact that there is no commentary to the 1854 Muluki Ain which will provide an explanation for the ranking of the various castes. It may well be that the Nepalese legislators were influenced by the Hindu texts but there are some problems in equating the Muslims in Nepal with the category of *mlechha* in the *dharma-shastras*. To begin with, in the 1854 Muluki Ain, the Muslims are a separate category from the *mlechha* (which is usually used to refer to Europeans). Although both are in the category of 'impure but touchable', in some places, the Muslims are ranked higher than the *mlechha* (MA p. 680 f. § 17), which suggests not only a distinction between the two categories but also a difference in their hierarchical status.

Because the ranking of *mleccha* in the *dharma-shastras* predates the arrival of the Muslims in India, one may speculate on the ranking of Muslims after their conquest of India. Would it have changed to reflect their dominant position in Hindu society? The Muslims in India were never ranked officially in a caste hierarchy, and therefore, this issue remains unresolved. But empirical evidence from India suggests that the 'traditional' status of *mleccha* was not always observed. For example, in Aggarwal's (1971) study of Mewat, he finds that the Muslim craftsmen were accorded the status of *shudra*, which is higher than the 'impure' category.

Gaborieau seems to waver on his position on the 'traditional' status of *mleccha* when he suggests another reason why Muslims are in the status 'impure' instead of 'Untouchable'. He cites the example of Hindu Untouchable castes who did not have political power but were raised progressively in the caste hierarchy through Sanskritization (1995: 238). Although Sanyal (1996) shows that Sanskritization did occur among Muslims in India, I am not entirely convinced

Table 2: Caste Hierarchy of the 1854 Muluki Ain

Pure Castes³ (cokho jāṭ) or Water Acceptable Castes (pāni calnyā jāṭ)	Wearers of the Holy Cord (tāgādhāri)	Upādhyaya Brahman Rajput (Thakuri) Jaisi Brāhman Chetri (Kṣatri) Dew Bhāju (Newār Brahmins) Indian Brahmin ascetic sects (Sannyāsi, etc) "lower" Jaisi various Newār castes
	Non-enslavable⁴ Alcohol Drinkers (namāsinya matwāli)	Magar Guruṅg Sunuwār other Newār castes
	Enslavable Alcohol Drinkers (māsinya matwāli)	Bhoṭe Cepāng Kumāl Hāyu Thāru Gharti (descendants of freed slaves)
	Water Unacceptable but 'touchable' castes (pāni nacalnyā choi chiṭo hālnunaparnyā)	Kasāi (Newār butchers) Kusle (Newār musicians) Hindu Dhobi Kulu (Newār tanners) Musulman (Muslims) Mlecch (Europeans)
Impure Castes Water-unacceptable castes (pāni nacalnyā jāṭ)	Untouchable Castes	Kami (blacksmith) & Sārki (tanners, shoemakers) Kaḍārā (descendants from unions between Kāmi and Sārki) Damāi (tailors and musicians) Gāine (minstrels) Bādi (musicians) Poṛe (Newār skimmers and fishermen) Cyāme (Newār scavengers)

³ Members of the pure castes may give water to, but not accept it from the impure castes, while members of the impure castes may accept, but cannot give water to members of the pure castes.

⁴ Enslavement is the punishment that is only applicable to members of certain castes whose members commit certain offences (see Höfer 1979: 124).

that this could be applied to the Muslims in Nepal. There is no historical evidence to suggest that the Muslims were emulating the behaviour of high-caste Hindus in an attempt to raise themselves through the ranks of the hierarchy.

To summarize, one of the hypothesis is that the Muslims were placed in the 'impure' category because it was pre-determined by Hindu law. The other hypothesis is that the position of Muslims is an arbitrary one, dependent on historical, political and economic factors. If we consider the former to be the case in Nepal, then the analysis that follows will be on the implications of having two religions within a single hierarchy. However, if we consider the latter hypothesis, then the task before us will be to isolate the factors that would explain the position of the Muslims in the hierarchy. To my knowledge, there is no historical evidence which shows if the Muslims had any influence on the promulgation of the Muluki Ain. It is reasonable to speculate that the role played by the Muslims in government (under the Mallas, the Shahs and subsequently the Ranas) may have been a factor in raising their status to that above the Untouchables, but the link is tenuous and as yet unsubstantiated.

Ranking and Purity: Muslims in a Hindu hierarchy

The Muluki Ain of 1854 was a legal code that upheld the status of Nepal as *asal hindusthān*, the true homeland of the Hindus. This automatically conferred upon its Hindu subjects a status higher than foreign Hindus, regardless of how orthodox those foreign Hindus may be (Höfer 1979: 152). Take, for example, the interesting case of Indian Brahmins, who despite being strict vegetarians, are ranked below the Nepalese Upādhyaya, who are not. The opposite, however, is true in the case of the Muslims. While a distinction was also made between 'native' and 'foreign' Muslims, it is the foreign Muslims who holds a higher position than the native ones as the following ranking of castes shows:

Read columnwise, the following order is to be seen: Musalmān (sic!) - Madhes
kā Teli (oil-pressers in the Terai - Kasāhi (Newār butchers) - Kuslyā (Kusle, N
ewār) - Kulu (Newār) - Mlech (Mlecch) - Curyādā (Curaṭe, Hill Muslim).

MA 1910 p 680 §17 (Höfer 1979: 161)

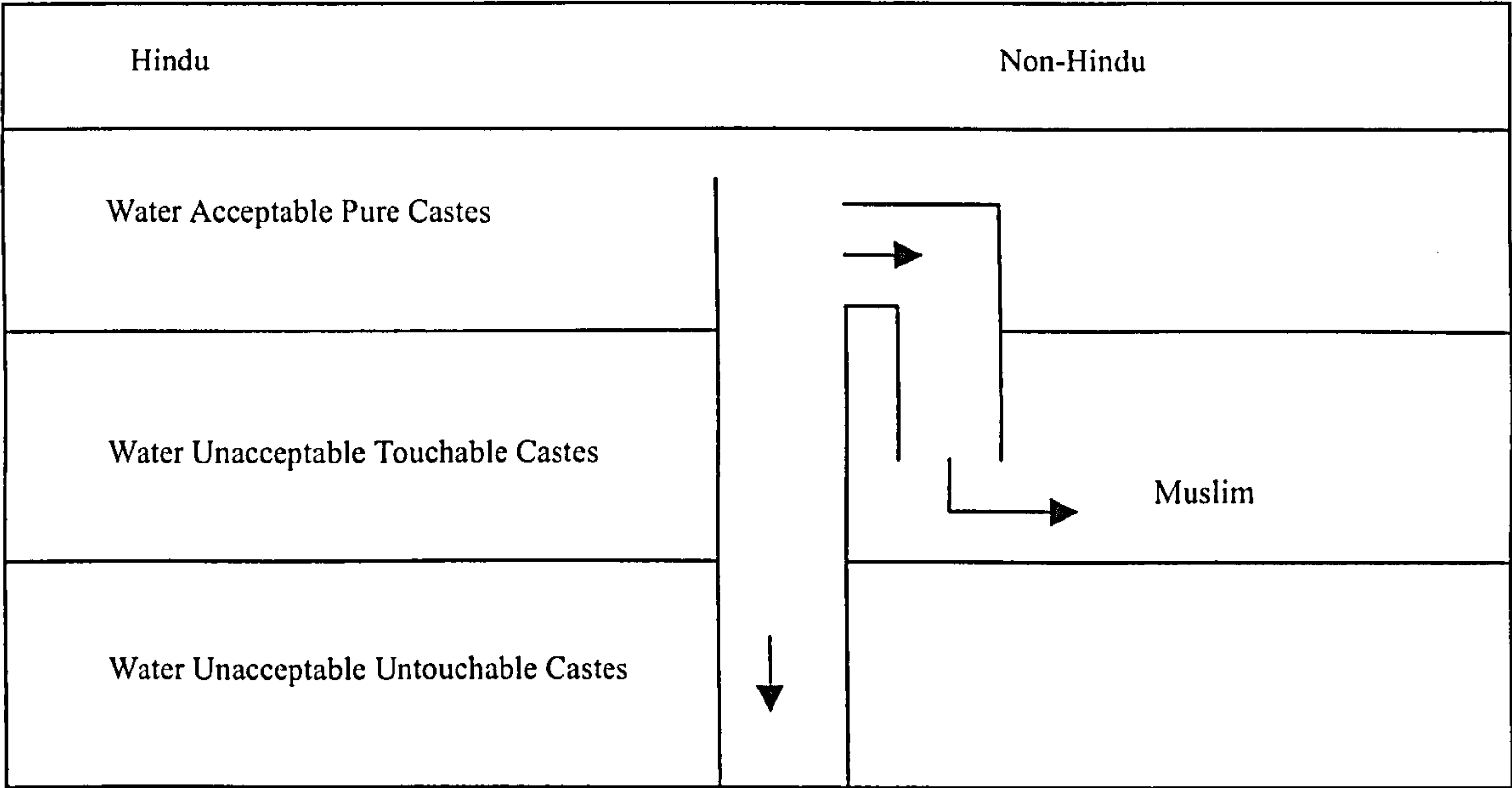
According to Höfer (1979), the term ‘Musalman’ refers to the foreign Muslims, while Curyādā refers to the Hill ‘native’ Muslims. The reason for this distinction can be gleaned from the hierarchy within Muslim society which is based on descent. In India, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, it is generally believed that those who are the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad are higher in the hierarchy than those who are the descendants of converts. Therefore, it is possible that the Muslims who were in Kathmandu at that time drew this distinction between themselves and the Hill Muslims, and that the Muluki Ain reflected this hierarchy. However this division is not recognized in other sections of the MA as Muslims are treated as one single caste whenever their external relations are dealt with (Höfer 1979: 161).

The inclusion of Muslims in a Hindu caste hierarchy was problematic, not least for the Hindus who are ranked below them. Although Muslims were placed in the ‘Impure but Water Unacceptable’ category in the caste hierarchy, their precise status within that category is not clear. In the 1854 MA page 680 §17, the highest position in that category was given to the Muslims, but on page 679 § 11, it is the Kasāi who ranked the highest. The ambiguity in ranking is also reflected in other sections of the MA which deal with relations between Muslims and other castes. For example, contact with a Muslim through *bhāt* (cooked rice), water or sexual intercourse is polluting for all Hindus even if they are lower than the Muslims in the caste hierarchy. The consequences of defilement through contact with a lower caste, which is usually the degradation of the perpetrator to a lower caste, does not apply in the case of contact with Muslims. Höfer found that “no mention is made of the degradation of the Muslim to the status of a Hindu Untouchable after having intercourse with an Untouchable woman” (1979: 161). The reverse is also true in the case of Hindus. In the 1935 Ain, in the section on sexual relations, it clearly states that:

People of the Hindu religion cannot be degraded to non-Hindu caste. He should be degraded to Hindu caste either of water acceptable or unacceptable caste group. Such people have to remain in Hindu religion. (1935: 114)

Gaborieau (1995) suggests that although they are placed in a linear hierarchy, their actual interactions with other castes show that the Muslims are a distinct group in the hierarchy, separated not only horizontally but also vertically (Gaborieau 1995: 232, Höfer 1979: 162). This is illustrated in the Table 2 (adapted from Höfer 1979: 162) which shows the caste hierarchy according to acceptance of bhāt and water.

Figure1: Caste hierarchy according to acceptance of bhāt (cooked rice) and water



Muslims may accept cooked rice and water only from the pure castes, but water from Muslims is not acceptable to anyone, even those below them in the hierarchy. However, if we consider the exchange of services, we see that the Dhobi (washerman caste) and the Damai (musician caste) do provide their

services to the Muslims, implying that Muslims are superior to these castes.⁵ This is because, as a rule, such castes do not provide services to the castes they consider inferior to themselves. This implies that there are two ways of distinguishing between the castes: one in terms of commensality and the other in terms of service.

The treatment of Muslims as a separate category in the Muluki Ain is emphasized by the fact that relations between Muslims are regulated by different rules. For example, according to Höfer (1979: 161) “... in the provisions regulating sexual relations amongst Muslims, the question of an additional defilement by accepting *bhat* (cooked rice) or water is not mentioned at all”. This suggests that rules about commensality are not applicable to Muslims. In another provision which deals with incest, Muslims are explicitly exempt in recognition of their different kinship pattern which allows marriage between patrilineal cousins (Höfer 1979: 164).

This implies that the Muluki Ain, despite incorporating Muslims into the caste hierarchy, was not an attempt to assimilate the Muslims into the Hindu fold. In order to keep the Muslims separate from the Hindus, the Civil Code had to make sure that degradation or upward mobility into the Muslim caste was not possible. In order to do this, the rule about the transmission of impurity -- that it flows upwards in the hierarchy - had to be suspended in the case of the Muslims.

Muslims in a Caste Hierarchy: Views from Below

Although Muslims are officially ranked in the hierarchy, their position above some Hindu castes is problematic for those Hindus below them. In his study of Hindu-Muslim relations in a village in north-central Nepal, Blustein (1977) found that the observance of ritual purity by Muslims is dependent on their

⁵ According to Höfer's (1979) interpretation of the Muluki Ain, the Muslims are below the Kasai, Kusle, Hindu Dhobi and Kulu castes. However, Macdonald (1975: 282) states that the Muslims are above all other castes within the “Water Unacceptable but Touchable” group. This would explain why the Dhobi and Musician castes provide services to the Muslims, although this does not explain the issue of water from Muslims not being accepted even by those lower in the hierarchy.

economic dependence on the dominant high caste Hindus. The more dependent a person is on the higher castes for his/her livelihood, the more he/she has to observe caste rules. In the case of the Muslims, because they do not depend on the Chetris for employment (since they have their own land, as well as working as itinerant bangle-sellers) they have greater independence with respect to the observance of ritual rules of purity and pollution. Similarly, because the Chetris do not depend on the Muslim to provide labour, they do not need to show their dominance over them by enforcing caste rules of purity and pollution.

Blustain (1977) also highlights the fact that the status of Muslims in the hierarchy is dependent on the context within which the interaction takes place. Although the Sarkis, Damais and Kamis accept food from the Chetris, they refuse to eat food that is given by Muslims, which implies that the Muslims are regarded as being lower than Sarkis, Damais and Kamis in the caste hierarchy. However, while the Muslims accept food from the Chetris, they refuse to accept food from the Sarkis, Damais and Kamis, implying that the Sarkis, Damais and Kamis are lower than the Muslims. The important point made by Blustain (1977) about researching inter-caste relations is to differentiate between what people say they should do, what they say they do, what they actually do. For example, although the Sarkis, Damais and Kamis proclaim that they do not buy meat from Muslim butchers, when Blustain (1977: 196) saw them waiting at the Muslim butchers' stall to buy buffalo meat, they were not embarrassed. Because there are different contexts within which caste rank is defined, this enables a person to hold different (and sometimes contradictory) ideas about inter-caste relationships.

In the caste hierarchy, Muslims in the village are ranked below the Chetris, but above the Hindu Untouchable castes (Damais, Kamis and Sarkis). In terms of ritual purity, this means that contact by a Chetri with a Damai, Kami or Sarki required purification with water, but not contact with Muslims, who are impure but touchable. From his observations of inter-caste relationships in a teashop, Blustain (1977) found that because of their impure status, the Damais, Sarkis and Kamis have to rinse their own glasses, while the Muslims did not. In

early 1973, a fight occurred between Muslims and Hindus that was to alter the expression of caste ranking between the Hindu Untouchables and the Muslims. A group of Muslim men who were on their way to meet their Hindu lovers encountered a group of Hindu men who were on their way to meet their Muslim lovers, and a fight ensued. Although inter-caste (and it appears, inter-religious) sexual relationships are considered a routine matter, the fight aroused strong anti-Muslim sentiments, especially from the Untouchables, who were more antagonistic towards the Muslims than the Chetris (Blustain 1977: 185). The Hindus' decision to punish the Muslims by forcing them to rinse their glasses in the teashop, was strongly advocated by the Untouchables, who argued that if they (as Hindus) have to do it, so should the Muslims. They threatened the Chetris that either the Muslims be forced to rinse their glasses or the Untouchables would not do so either. In the end, the Chetris found that the option of lowering the status of Muslims was more favourable than uplifting the Untouchables, and they therefore enforced the rule of rinsing glasses for the Muslims. The Muslims, because of their minority status, complied.

This case shows that the Hindus are aware of the anomalous position of Muslims in the caste hierarchy, and that the higher rank that is accorded to Muslims creates antagonism and resentment towards the Muslims, especially on the part of the Untouchable Hindus who are ranked below them. This case also illustrates that caste rank and caste rules can be changed by concerted collective effort. By drawing attention to their Hindu identity, and threatening to refrain from rinsing their glasses (and thus polluting everyone else above them), the Untouchables were able to bring the Muslims down (at least within the context of inter-caste relations at the teashop) to their level. In addition, the contested nature of caste ranking also allows for slight variations of the caste hierarchy from village to village.

The study by Blustain (1977) shows that there are no fixed criteria for determining caste ranking. Rather, it is defined according to the context in which the different caste groups interact. For example, in the aftermath of the fight

between Hindus and Muslims cited above, the higher ranking that is accorded to Muslims bears little significance when Hindu purity and identity is at stake. The act of forcing the Muslims to rinse their glasses can be considered as a minor adjustment made to ensure that the caste structure is intact. Yet, in other contexts outside of the teashop, Muslims are still regarded by the Chetris as higher than the Untouchables.

Kathmandu Muslim Discourse on Caste

It was not easy to get Muslims to dig up the past, especially when it concerns their low caste status. This could be interpreted as an attempt at biographical reconstruction, where the past is suppressed so as to present themselves as equals to the Hindus with whom they live. However, the reluctance to speak about the past has a more immediate purpose: they simply do not want to antagonize the Hindus by saying negative things about them. It mattered to them that I was 'writing a book' and they asked that I write 'good things' and so that there will be no 'fights'.

The few who agreed to share their recollections had a way of turning their narratives into validations of the present. Take for example, the interview I had with a Muslim shopkeeper:

Researcher: What was it like in the past? What was the relationship between Muslims and Hindus?

Informant: Oh, it was very strict. This is a very strict Hindu country.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Informant: Strict Hindu country. But for us it is very good.

Researcher: In what way was it strict? Was it easy to do business with Hindus?

Informant: (laughing) Business is business.

Researcher: How did the Hindus treat you?

Informant: Oh, they used to throw money at me. No touching [was allowed] between Muslims and Hindus. Some people even say that the Hindus would wash the money we give them (laughs).

But that is a long time ago. Now it is not like that. Now it is very good for us. No trouble for Muslims. It is very peaceful here.

Similar to the findings of Blustain (1977), caste relationship between Hindu-Muslim in Kathmandu was defined more by context than their official positions in the hierarchy. This is illustrated by this anecdote about Prime Minister Bir Shamsheer (1885-1901):

[Bir Shamsheer] was as good a connoisseur of food as that of music: he was a real gourmet with a special taste of Mughlai dishes which were specially prepared for him by Nepali cooks in observance of caste rules but under the strict guidance of trained Muslim chefs who would tell them or show them from a distance what was to be done without actually touching the spices, condiments or other ingredients (Shaha 1996: 20)

The presence of low-caste Muslims in the kitchen of the Prime Minister shows that caste rank defers to skill. In fact, that was the case for all Muslims who were working for the Royal Palace, from language specialists to singers. But in terms of ritual purity, commensality is one of the most important vectors of caste, and the idea that a Muslim is allowed into the kitchen of the Prime Minister shows clearly that ritual purity is but one principle upon which the caste system rests.

The arbitrary application of caste rules was highlighted by a Kashmiri Muslim man:

My uncle used to tell me that he could go to the palace and talk face to face with the King. Such was the respect given to Muslims. But at the corner teashop, we Muslims were Untouchables. Did you know that they wanted me to wash the cup I drank with? I was so angry that I smashed the cup on the floor and paid money for the cup instead.

The arbitrariness of caste or rather the exercise of political power to counterbalance caste is yet another example of the ambivalence of the state towards the Muslims. On the one hand, the state employs the services of the Muslims in both in the royal palace and the government. On the other, the laws set down by the state indicate the low status of Muslims. However, the narrative

of the Kashmiri man hints that although he is badly treated by those who are lower in the hierarchy, the ones at the top (i.e. the King himself) do not abuse or enforce the caste relationship. So although the Muslims had to struggle with their status of an impure caste in their daily lives, they held on to the idea of a king who gave them the respect that Hindu society seemed to deny them.

Caste in Kathmandu Today

When I conducted fieldwork among the Muslims of Kathmandu in 1998, I found many instances of commensality between Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. I remember Mrs Shah and her family, who have lived at Chhetrapati for more than forty years. Her daughter was getting married and her neighbours, who were mostly Hindus, were invited to the wedding. Mrs Shah is a warm and friendly person, and it showed in the way that she greeted all her female guests with hugs and smiles. She proudly introduced them to me as “My oldest friends from this area.” Having read about caste restrictions between Hindus and Muslims, I was most excited to see what would happen when it was time to eat. As it turned out, when the food was laid out on the floor, the non-Muslim guests sat amongst the Muslim guests, and Mrs Shah personally served all of them food which they ate with relish. The meal included buffalo meat, chicken, *acar* (pickles) and fresh vegetables. The only objection came from a Buddhist woman who said that she did not eat chicken, and Mrs Shah immediately ladled some buffalo meat onto her plate instead.

However, as a Muslim, I experienced caste in another way. I was invited to the house of a high-caste Newar Sakya family. My friend, himself a Sakya, discreetly told me not to mention anything about my Muslim status to the hosts. He explained, “They are very strict Sakyas, and they might not allow you to enter their kitchen.”⁶ Needless to say, the visit was an uncomfortable one – I felt as though I was violating their hospitality by not telling them about who I was. But I also learnt how caste or religious identity can be hidden or camouflaged. Because

⁶ The kitchen is regarded as the most sacred place in a Newar house.

I looked and dressed like a Nepalese, it was hard for the locals – be they Hindus, Buddhists or Muslims – to guess what caste or religion I belong to based on my physical appearance. In that way, I was ‘smuggled’ into various Hindu homes and temples. However, my anonymity did not last long. As time went on and as my social network widened, descriptions of me became more specific – I was no longer just a Singapore *keti* (girl); people also began to refer to me as ‘that Musalman [Muslim] *keti*’. However, I did not notice a marked change in my relationship with non-Muslims. One of my non-Muslim friends said that my ‘foreign’ status made me different from the ‘local Muslims’ and that I was considered more as a ‘guest’ than a ‘Muslim’.

On the other hand, I also found that Muslims are rigorous in their observance of commensality with Hindus. Muslims generally do not accept meat (cooked or otherwise) that is given by non-Muslims, regardless of caste. However, the reason behind this has more to do with the religion of the giver and the condition of the meat that is given rather than considerations of hierarchy. There is a rule in Islam that says Muslims should eat only *halal* meat, i.e. that which has been slaughtered according to Islamic rites. The effect of having consumed meat that is not *halal*, however, is often expressed in notions of being contaminated or spoiled.⁷ One female Muslim informant told me that she refuses to eat in restaurants owned by non-Muslims because she does not want to be spoiled – *bigrinchha* – by consuming the non-*halal* food. I asked her what would happen if she had accidentally eaten such meat. “You have to bathe your whole body to be clean again. But even then it is already in your body. Even [eating] a bit of the [un-*halal*] meat will spoil you,” she warned.

While it is tempting to compare the Muslim discourse on bodily contamination with Hindu discourse about impurity, I should however, comment that the idea of physical contamination is not unique to Muslims in South-Asia. In South-East-Asia, the idea of contamination is commonly used to define Muslim

⁷ I hesitate to use the term ‘pollution’ given its link with Hindu ideas about ritual purity. Also, the Muslims I spoke to did not use the Nepali word for ‘pollution’ which is ‘*jutho*’.

identity and emphasize religious differences between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, within the context of South-Asia, the discourse on bodily contamination is one that is recognizable to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as it shares ideological similarities in terms of the transmission of impurity.

The strongest statement about commensality with non-Muslims came from Shaibunesa, a young girl from Siraha⁸ who recently migrated to the capital. She told me that one should not even drink the water in a Hindu person's house because all food and drink that is served by a Hindu is considered as *haram* (forbidden). If a person consumes any *haram* food, no one will eat the food that is prepared by that person or marry the person's offspring. If one substituted the Nepali word '*jutho*' (polluted) for *haram*, then Shaibunesa's description fits neatly with Hindu ideas about the transmission of impurity from a lower caste (the Hindus) to a higher caste (the Muslims). It also suggests that the substance that is transmitted is sin (that which punishable) as well as impurity (that which is polluting).

When I told Shaibunesa's ideas about commensality to Kathmandu-born Muslims, most were shocked at the strict application of the term '*haram*'. While they agreed that one should not eat *haram* food, they believed the term only applies to the consumption of food such as pork, meat that has not been slaughtered according to Muslim rites, and alcohol. "How can you live like that?" asked Imran, a businessman. "That means you don't mix with anyone at all. That is not possible. And it is not good behaviour to show the Hindus. That is too much."

⁸ Shaibunesa's account should be regarded as a special case because she is from outside Kathmandu, where caste boundaries between Hindus and Muslims are clearly marked.

It could be argued that the prohibitions on commensality and ideas about ritual purity is a function of the level of urbanization; in fact, most of the Kathmandu Muslims I spoke to dismissed those ideas as ‘village’ ideas, and saw themselves as being different from ‘village’ Muslims. It could also be part of their strategy to adapt themselves to the Hindu environment. By highlighting certain types of food as being *haram* instead of eschewing all Hindu food outright, it allows Muslims to interact with their non-Muslim neighbours at a social level and thereby preventing their own isolation.⁹ One Muslim man said to me, “I know what is *halal* and what is *haram*. If a Hindu goes to the temple and brings back the *prasad* (offering), if that *prasad* does not contain pork, or anything *haram*, why can't I eat it? Of course I will eat it! I have eaten such food many times.”

Caste in Muslim Society

Introduction

The 1854 Muluki Ain recognized the fact that some of the groups that were being incorporated into the linear hierarchy had caste hierarchies of their own. A good example is that of the Newars, who are the Hindu/Buddhist indigenous population of Kathmandu. In the 1854 Muluki Ain, the Newar castes were regarded separately and ranked according to their ritual purity (see Table 1). With regards to the Muslims, the Muluki Ain recognized two groups – the ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ Muslims (see above) and it was argued that the distinction was made to distinguish the Muslims who claim foreign descent from those who are the descendants of local or Indian converts. There is a substantial body of work on the issue of caste in Muslim society, and in this section, I shall deal with caste as it relates to Muslim society in Kathmandu.

Studies of caste in Muslim societies in South Asia highlight two seemingly contradictory phenomena:

⁹A comparison can be made with the Muslims in Singapore, where the strict application of the term ‘*halal*’ has led to the Muslims avoiding events where non-*halal* meat is served. There has been some concern among Singaporeans about the effect this will have on social cohesion and integration.

On the one hand, there seems to be a broad consensus affirming the existence of caste or caste-like structures in Indian Muslim society. On the other hand, the very same literature also indicates that Indian Muslims almost universally deny that their society exhibits anything caste-like at all.

Fanselow 1993: 2

The question “Is there caste in Muslim societies?” hinges on the definition of caste – whether it is defined structurally as a form of stratification, or according to a more culture-specific criteria with the Hindu model as the archetype. In the seminal volume of essays on caste and social stratification edited by Ahmad, most of the authors “based their definition on caste on the Hindu phenomenon and then go on to examine the extent to which the social stratification of the communities studied by them corresponds to the Hindu model” (1978: 3). Using features of the Hindu caste system such as endogamy and hereditary occupational specialization as a kind of checklist for the existence of caste, these researchers have shown that these features are indeed present in the Muslim societies that they studied. The conclusion that they draw is that there is caste (or there are at least caste-like structures) in Muslim society. However, having established the method of analysis, the authors then seem to question the very basis of comparison: “... they are clearly divided on whether the systems of social stratification ... can be compared to the Hindu caste system” (Ahmad 1978: 3). Obviously they are, because Ahmad then concludes that caste among Muslims exist, “but its form has been greatly weakened and modified and it differs from the Hindu model in certain details” (1978: 12).

The explanation for caste in Muslim society is also based on the assumption that caste is derived from the Hindu model. Srinivas et al. (1959) explain it as a structure which was imported into Islam by the Hindu converts. In his study of the pattern of dominance among Muslims in South Asia, Gaborieau suggests that the reason for the survival of Hindu practices is that

Islam, for South Asian Muslims at least, has not offered an overall model of society. Muslims, whether they come from outside or are local converts, have to find elsewhere models for their social life. (1979: 194)

His article clearly shows that Muslims who form the dominant group in society follow Hindu social models and the underlying assumptions of impurity. However, it is not clear exactly how or why the lack of an overall model of society has led to the adoption or survival of Hindu social models. In trying to compare Muslims and Hindus, he chooses to use the Hindu religions as a yardstick against which to measure the Muslims: "...if something specific is to be found among the Muslim majority, it is only after checking the absence of any given feature among the Hindus that it can be declared specific of the Muslim community" (Gaborieau 1979: 189).¹⁰ There are several problems with this approach. Not only does this method of analysis overlook the meaning that such features may have to Muslims, it is an essentialist approach that assumes Hinduism and Islam to be two mutually exclusive religions. This is not to say that there can be no basis for comparing Hindu and Muslim systems of social stratification. Rather than use one as a yardstick for another, it is perhaps useful to remember the critique made by Peel about studies of syncretism and acculturation: "such variation in synthesis and acculturation depends primarily upon how those involved interpret what they are doing rather than upon [t]he mechanical assignation of cultural traits" (1968: 140).

Ahmad (1978) argues that if caste in Muslim society is wholly due to the influence of Hinduism, then these caste divisions should see a gradual elimination with the practice of Islam's egalitarian creed. However, he found that Islamization serves to reinforce rather than weaken caste distinctions, which points to the fact that there is something in Islam that maintains the caste structure. The ideological tension between equality and hierarchy in Islam can be illustrated by two oft-quoted traditions of the Prophet Muhammad:

¹⁰Gaborieau's approach is also interesting because he implies that conversion is not a total transformation of values and norms but about continuity (see Chapter Six).

- There are no genealogies in Islam (quoted in Ahmad 1978: 14)
- Take ye care, that none contract in marriage but their proper guardians, and they be not so contracted with equals. (Bukhari 1862: 436, quoted in Ahmad 1978: 14)

Legitimized by the latter tradition, Muslim jurists have developed an elaborate hierarchy based on birth and descent. Citing the example of the Hanafi school, Levy (1962) notes that the hierarchy is defined thus:

- a) an Arab was superior to a non-Arab
- b) among Arabs, all Quraishites were of equal social standing in a class by themselves, and all other Arabs were equal irrespective of their tribes
- c) amongst non-Arabs, a man was by birth the equal of an Arab if both his father and grandfather had been Muslims before him, but only if he were sufficiently wealthy or provide an adequate *mahr* (marriage endowment)
- d) a learned non-Arab was equal to an ignorant Arab, even if he was a descendant of Ali
- e) a Muslim *kazi* or theologian ranked higher than a merchant and a merchant higher than a tradesman

Levy 1962: 62 quoted in Ahmad 1978: 14

However, Ahmad emphasizes that even if local stratification can be legitimated by Islamic religious tradition, the form of social stratification in other Muslim societies “does not approximate even remotely to the Indian model. [C]aste among the Muslims in India owes itself directly to Hindu influences, but it has been reinforced by the justification offered for the idea of birth and descent as criteria of status in Islamic law” (1978: 15). What is interesting is that even when he has proven that such stratification can be legitimized, Ahmad (1978) rejects caste as an Islamic phenomenon and emphasizes the uniqueness of Muslim caste in India.

Taking the comparative perspective adopted by Ahmad (1978), Lindholm (1995) argues that the world of South Asian Muslims is not so different from that of Middle Eastern Muslims. For example, although the notion of pollution in the Middle East is not as highly developed as it is in India, this can be substituted by the concept of shame. Also commensality between groups is not permitted – the lowest social groups cannot give food to those higher although the reverse is permitted. “It is quite possible ... to argue that the similarities between South Asian Muslims and Hindus are not a result of assimilation but rather of structural correspondence” (Lindholm 1995: 457).

Apart from the work of Gaborieau (1982, 1984, 1993) and Thapa (1995) there has been little written about caste in Nepalese Muslim society¹¹. In both studies, an attempt is made to rank the different groups of Muslims in terms of the Hindu model of caste, i.e. according to notions of high/low, pure/impure, touchable/untouchable (see Figure 2 for an example of a Muslim caste hierarchy). At the top of the hierarchy are the Ashraf. Under this category are those who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad (Sayyids), the Quraish tribe to which the Prophet belonged (Sheikh), the Muslim rulers of India (Mughals), and the Afghan rulers (Pathan). The inclusion of the high-caste Hindu Rajput converts (Thakurai) in this category clearly shows that status was not sacrificed upon conversion to Islam. In fact, there are parallels with the Hindu caste system throughout the ranking in the Muslim caste hierarchy.

This is especially clear in the case of the Untouchables, which include tanners, musicians and cleaners, occupational castes that are also considered as Untouchables in the Hindu caste hierarchy.

In his study of the Curate of the Nepalese Hills, Gaborieau (1982, 1984, 1993) challenged the idea that Islam is an egalitarian religion by showing the contexts within which hierarchy is expressed in Muslim society. Through a detailed analysis of life-cycle rituals, he finds makes an argument for caste based

¹¹ Siddika (1993: 170-1) had alluded to caste in Muslim society with a hierarchy that was quoted from Yadav (no date) but again, it was not dealt with in any detail.

Table 3: Muslim Caste Hierarchy in Nepal

(adapted from Gaborieau 1993: 49)

Ashraf and twice-born converts			1. Sayyid
			2. Shaikh
			3. Mughal
			4. Pathan
			5. Thakurai (Rajput converts)
Non-Ashraf Lower Caste Converts	Pure		6. Jat (Cultivators)
			7. Gaddi (Cow-herders)
			8. Sabzi-farosh (Farmers)
			9. Dhuniya (Cotton carders)
			10. Julaha (Weavers)
			11. Curihara (Bangle-makers)
			12. Rangrez (Cloth-dyers)
			13. Darzi (Tailors)
			14. Bhat (Genealogists)
			15. Faqir (Funeral priests)
			16. Hajjam (Barbers)
	Impure	Touchable	17. Cik and Qassab (Butchers)
			18. Dhobi (Washermen)
			19. Teli (Oilpressers)
			20. Pasi and Araqi (Distillers)
		Untouchable	21. Moci (Tanners/Cobblers)
			22. Dafali (Drummers/priests)
			23. Nat /Natuwa (Musicians, dancers)
			24. Dharkar (basket-makers)
			25. Patharkat (stone-grinders)
			26. Halal-khor (cleaners)

on, among other things, the existence of ritual specialists, marriage patterns and the ranking within Muslim society based on notions of purity/impurity. Both Gaborieau (1993) and Thapa (1995) make the point that there are significant differences between the Muslim and Hindu hierarchies. One of them is the lack of a Muslim equivalent of a high-caste ritual priest, which is the Brahmin in the Hindu hierarchy. The criteria for ranking and the degree of elaboration of the hierarchy also differ, with the Muslim model having a plurality of criteria such as descent and geographical origin. According to Thapa, the Taraian caste divisions among the Taraian Muslims are 'very clear' (1995: 84) and ascribes this to the fact that the Taraian Muslims are descendants of Indian Muslims, and have therefore derived their hierarchy from the Indian Muslim model.

It should be pointed out that both studies are based on rural settings. The issue of caste in Kathmandu, an urban setting, as I will show, is more problematic. Some of the problems that are faced by the Muslims in Kathmandu with regards to caste are the same as those faced by other caste groups living in a city. The rules about commensality are difficult to enforce when there is anonymity and where the population is highly mobile (Sharma 1999:61). The composition of the Muslim population is also significant – unlike the Tarai, where the Muslim population share a common history as descendants of immigrants from northern India, the composition of Muslim society in Kathmandu is more heterogenous, with Muslims from Tibet, Kashmir, the Tarai and India.

The anonymity that the city accords to the recent immigrants has led some of those who are of low caste to create new identities for themselves in an attempt to raise themselves in the social hierarchy¹². I once interviewed Ashma, a woman from Siraha who had been living in Kathmandu with her husband and children for about a year. She said that she and her husband are Kashmiri Muslims, and I asked her what she meant by Kashmiri. "We do the same things as the Kashmiri

¹² For a lively account of caste identities in an urban context, see Shaw (2000) Kinship and Continuity

Muslims here – we respect the *dargah sharif* (sacred tomb). Our name is Shah, you see? That is a Kashmiri name,” she explained. When I went to visit her neighbour, who is also a recent immigrant from Siraha, she dismissed Ashma’s claim to be a Kashmiri with a loud exclamation. “They are not Kashmiris! They do cleaning work for the Kashmiris. They are only trying to be like [the Kashmiris]. They are Khan [Pathan caste]!” The process of upgrading one’s social status by emulating the religious practices of the upper castes and marrying into the upper caste or marrying closely within one’s own family, is called ‘ashrafization’ (Shaw 2000: 133) the Muslim equivalent of Sanskritization, which is the upward mobility of a caste through the Hindu hierarchy through the same means. But as Shaw (2000) points out, cosmetic ashrafization (as in the case of Ashma) is not an effective strategy for those who are still linked to their village. A Muslim girl, who eloped with her low-caste Muslim husband, was complaining to me about how difficult life was in the city. She said that because of her low caste, no one would share food with her, and that she has to beg for money on her own because none of the other women would accompany her. I asked her why she did not simply hide her identity from her neighbours. “Where can we hide? We are beggars, we don’t have anywhere to stay. If we do [something like that], if people find out, we will be thrown out of this place,” she said.

In order to evaluate the existence of caste in Kathmandu, a set of criteria for caste has to be defined first. Let us consider the following, based on the criteria used by Bhattacharya (1973, quoted in Thapa 1995: 79) for caste among Muslims of West Bengal:

1. A caste is endogamous
2. All castes have occupational specialization
3. Castes are hierarchically ranked
4. Ideology involving restrictions on social interaction and commensality

However, before jumping into an evaluation of the above, I would like to reiterate the types of groups that exist in Kathmandu. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the Muslims are divided along the lines of geographical origin, descent and

religious affiliation. In that chapter, I raised the point that these are not discrete categories but rather overlapping ones. This means that a person can belong to all three groups and justify his actions in three different ways. The implication of this on the issue of caste will be clear from the examples cited below.

Endogamy

A total of 90 couples were surveyed from four different groups: Shah, Sheikh, Khan and Tibetan. Out of the 90 couples, 32 were exogamous marriages, 10 of which were with non-Muslim converts. A more detailed breakdown is provided below:

Figure 3: Marriage Patterns of Kathmandu Muslims

Shah (13 Couples)	Sheikh (27 Couples)	Khan (18 Couples)	Tibetan (32 Couples)
1 Kathmandu Ansari	1 Kathmandu Khan	1 Kathmandu Ansari	2 Chinese Muslim
1 Kathmandu Joo	2 Kathmandu Ansari	1 Kathmandu Joo	4 Non-Muslim Converts
4 Indian Sayyids	1 Karachi Sayyid	1 Kathmandu Sheikh	* 1 American
1 Kashmiri Saiyyid	1 Taraian Sheikh	1 Kashmiri Muslim	* 2 Tibetan Buddhists
	4 Non-Muslim Converts	2 Non-Muslim Converts	* 1 Taiwanese
	*1 Brahmin	* 2 Brahmins	1 Darjeeling Tibetan Muslim
	*3 Newars		1 Kathmandu Sayyid
	1 Chinese Muslim		
	1 Kapilvastu Ansari		
	1 Indian Muslim		
Exogamous : 6	Exogamous: 12	Exogamous: 7	Exogamous: 8

* (breakdown of non-Muslim converts)

In Kathmandu, the Shah and Sheikhs often intermarry and marriages between them are regarded as isogamous, although some may argue that the Shah (being the descendants of the Prophet) are higher in the hierarchy than the Sheikhs (who are descendants of the tribe to which the Prophet belonged). There are about 70 Shah and Sheikh households in Kathmandu. Out of a total of 40 couples, 6 (15 percent) are arranged marriages with Shah and Sheikh castes from outside Kathmandu. When I asked them why such marriages are arranged, the

explanation was that they preferred to marry within their own group, but they also have a taboo against marrying 'too closely' within the family. However, in contrast their professed preference for caste endogamy, there is also a high percentage of marriages with other castes from Kathmandu, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Out of the 40 Shah and Sheikh couples, 4 (10 percent) were with non-Muslim converts, 3 of whom are Newars while 1 was a Brahmin. Nine marriages (22.5 percent) were with members of local groups, such as the Khan, Ansari and Joo. This means that only 52.5 percent of all Shah and Sheikh marriages are caste and geographically endogamous.

Among 18 couples from the Khan, or rather, Pathan caste, as many as 7 (39 percent) are exogamous unions, with 2 hypergamous marriages (Joo and Sheikh), 2 with non-Muslim converts and three with other Muslim groups (Ansari, Kashmiri and Indian Muslim). Unlike the Shaikhs and Shahs, there are no instances of geographically exogamous marriages among the Pathans.

As for the Tibetans, out of 32 couples surveyed, only 8 (22 percent) are exogamous, 4 of which are with non-Muslim converts, 1 with Sayyid, 1 with a same-caste Tibetan Muslim from Darjeeling and 2 with a Chinese Muslim resident in Kathmandu. That means that 78 percent of Tibetan Muslims practice caste endogamy, the highest among all the Muslim groups.

Occupational Castes

In Gaborieau's (1982, 1984) study of caste, he points to the specific service roles played by certain groups of Muslims as argument for the existence of caste. The context within which caste is defined is the life-cycle ritual, during which these groups have to perform tasks which are regarded as unclean by their patrons. In Kathmandu, life-cycle rituals are not uniformly performed by all Muslims. For example, in Kathmandu, births and circumcisions take place in hospitals (cf. Gaborieau 1982: 155). The Muslim barbers, who used to perform circumcision, are now limited to cutting hair and shaving. Even the role of the *qadi* – the religious man who performs the *nikah* or marriage ceremony – can be

done by anyone who has the knowledge of the procedure (cf. Gaborieau 1984: 249). One Muslim man said to me, “Anyone can be a *qadi*. Of course, if you want, you can call the *mulvi* to do it, but if he is not free, anyone who knows the proper knowledge can do it. I did for one of my neighbours.”

However, there are some occupational castes that can be discerned in Kathmandu. For example, the butchers in Sundhara are mostly descendants of butcher castes from the Tarai. Also, those who work in embroidery are also from the lower castes from the Tarai (although they are not necessarily from the tailor caste). While there is some evidence of occupational or ritual specialists in Kathmandu, they are not associated with ideas of inauspiciousness or impurity. For example, for the ritual of sacrifice during Bakrid or Eid-ul Adha, the Muslim butchers of Kathmandu are invited to the homes of Muslims, but not to perform the sacrifice. This is usually done by a male member of the household who would say the prayers for the sacrifice and perform the actual slaughter. The butchers are employed to skin the goat and prepare the meat for cooking. During weddings and feasts, the *mulvi* is invited to their homes to perform the rites and lead the prayers, but like Gaborieau (1982) noted, the *mulvi* is not considered the highest in the caste hierarchy nor is he associated with auspiciousness.

Conclusion

The study of the 1854 caste hierarchy provides some valuable insights into the relationship Muslims and the Hindu state. The inclusion of the Muslims in the caste hierarchy is not an issue in itself – in India, the co-existence of Muslims and Hindus have also produced relationships based on caste rank (Dumont 1980, Orenstein 1965, Aggarwal 1971, Gaborieau 1995, Madan 1995). However, as in India, the issue being debated is the rank that is accorded to Muslims. There are two possible explanations for the impure status of the Muslims in the 1854 Muluki Ain: it is a status that is pre-defined by the Hindu law (Gaborieau 1995) or it is a reflection of the interrelationship between Hindus and Muslims at the time (Höfer 1979, Blustain 1977). In my opinion, these theories need not be mutually exclusive. In the absence of a commentary on the 1854 Muluki Ain, it is

plausible that the promulgators had derived the rank for Muslims from Hindu texts. Equally plausible is the idea that ritual purity in the hierarchy was counterbalanced by the Muslims' association with the Mughal court and their specialized skills which were valued by the Nepalese court.

In concluding this chapter, I wish to draw upon the effect of the Muluki Ain on Muslim identity. The exceptions and special provisions that were made for the Muslims in the Muluki Ain lead to the hypothesis that the Muslims were a problematic category in the Muluki Ain, and that ultimately, there was not one but two social orders (Madan 1995). This is primarily because of their religious creed which is regarded as being diametrically opposed to Hinduism. According to Höfer, it was 'a particular attempt to provide this duality with a legal basis by binding together two social orders without fully denying their mutually exclusive orientations' (1979: 163).¹³

Srinivas made an interesting argument about caste and secularism in India in his book 'On Living in a Revolution and Other Essays' (1992). He argues that the caste system allowed different religions to co-exist because very essence of caste is the 'acceptance' of difference. The price of religious tolerance as prescribed by the Hindu institutional framework of caste may be inequity and hierarchy, but it at least recognizes plurality. This idea was also highlighted by Madan, who foresees that

[a]s the caste order dissolves, Hinduism's structural formula for pluralism also collapses, for it does not have an alternative formula with which to ensure orderly social existence while accommodating diversity. A modernized Hinduism that denounces caste may well end up being fundamentalist and intolerant. (Madan 1997: 197).

However the arguments put forward by Srinivas and Madan seem like sophisticated apologies for Hindu hierarchy. Under the gloss of 'acceptance' and 'orderly social existence' is the fact that the majority of the population who

¹³ This is also the case with the indigenous group called the Newars, whose inclusion into the Parbatiya caste system has been problematic, given the fact that the Newars already had a complex caste system of their own (Gellner 1995: 12).

occupy the lower rungs of the hierarchy are materially and socially disadvantaged. Their arguments also conveniently overlook the persecution of Buddhists and Jains by Hindus (Thapar 1992) which occurred under the so-called 'tolerant' Hindu caste system.

My interviews with Muslims seem to show that while the Muslims do credit the Hindu state with tolerance, this sentiment by no means is linked to the caste hierarchy. It has to do with the right to practise their religion, which ironically, is protected by the same Muluki Ain that ranks them as impure. Despite their low status in the Hindu hierarchy and their ostracism by Hindus of all castes in their daily lives, the Muslims did not reject Hinduism as a state religion when their chance came in 1990. In that year, a new constitution was being drafted, and the Buddhists, another minority religious group, seized the opportunity to demand a secular constitution. However, in the public rallies that were held in the capital, the Muslims were conspicuously absent. The next chapter looks at the Muslims' attitude towards the Hindu state and analyzes their response to the movement for secularism.

Finally, if caste is defined as a system of stratification where there are ritual specialists, endogamy, notions of auspiciousness/inauspiciousness, purity/impurity and prohibitions of commensality and touch between different groups of people, then the data I have presented do not qualify Muslim society in Kathmandu as a caste-based society. This, however, does not negate the fact that there are different groups in Kathmandu which can be distinguished according to descent, history and geographical origin. Kathmandu attracts Muslims from all parts of Nepal, which means that Kathmandu Muslim is still evolving. As these new members are likely to have come from caste-based societies, it is possible that this may lead to the strengthening of caste identity among Muslims.

CHAPTER FIVE

Muslims in a Hindu Kingdom: an Analysis of Secularism in Nepal

In the wake of the People's Revolution in 1990, when a new constitution was being drafted, there was a mass movement for secularism in Kathmandu. Although there is a popular perception that all religious minorities supported the move to secularize the constitution, in reality, the Muslims were not involved in the secularism movement. This chapter looks at the reasons behind this, and analyzes the Muslims' definition of their religious identity within the context of a Hindu kingdom.

Secularism from the top

In December 1997, on the eve of the general elections in India, Stanley Tambiah conducted a seminar at the London School of Economics about the crisis of secularism in India. His talk was timely: after almost 50 years of secular Congress government, the (Hindu) Bharatiya Janata Party's coalition government had just won a majority of 159 seats in the 1997 election. However, the crisis of secularism was not caused by the BJP victory; the fact that the BJP was able to win the election was a symptom that the secularist project in India was in crisis. There were signs of trouble as early as the 1950's: in north India, the resurgence of Hindu religious nationalism was marked by communal riots which occurred between Muslims and Hindus. In 1958, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru admitted that the two hardest tasks 'had been the building of a just society and a secular polity' (Madan 1997: 271).

After the traumatic partition of India in 1947, the secularist project in India was launched to stabilize and unite a fractured society. At the same time, the state was under pressure to address the inequities of the caste system. Since caste is derived from, and governed by, Hindu laws, the state had no choice but to

include a provision in the Constitution that would enable political intervention in religious matters. Article 25 (2) of the Constitution of India states that:

(2) Nothing in this article will affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the State from making any law -

(a) regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice;

(b) providing for social welfare and reform or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus.

The aim of Article 25 was to enable a secular interpretation of religious laws, but in practice the state proved itself to be ambivalent in its chosen role as the final arbiter in religious conflicts. The issue that was faced by the secular government was the extent to which it could intervene in religious matters, especially when it involved multi-religious claims, such as the case of and the Babri Masjid in 1992. There was also the problem of defining the criteria for intervention; the case of the Akal Takht in Amritsar in 1984 showed a secular government that was slow to react to the danger of communalism, to the extent that extreme force was needed to counter the already powerful Sikh militants (Madan 1997: 272).

Article 25 was also a legal loophole which enabled political advocacy for certain denominations, as was the case in the 1980 Shah Bano case. Shah Bano was a Muslim woman who filed for maintenance from her husband after her divorce. Under Islamic law, maintenance after divorce is not permissible, and Shah Bano's case was brought to the civil court, where it was decided that the country's civil law was above that of any personal law, thus enabling Shah Bano to receive maintenance. This caused an uproar among the Muslims, for whom the *shari'a* (Islamic law) is supreme and inviolate. To appease the Muslims, the then Prime Minister, Raj Gandhi ordered a special exemption to be given to Muslims to observe the *shari'a* in matters concerning the maintenance of divorced women. The special concession given to Muslims thus led the Hindus to claim theirs, Ayodhya, the contested Hindu-Muslim religious site that was to spark communal

riots across India. If secularism meant being equidistant between religions, the special concessions given to Muslims is tantamount to the state shifting in favour towards one religion, thereby resulting in it having to then shift towards other religions by giving them concessions too, in order to maintain that equidistance (Varshney 1993: 249). In secular hands, Article 25 theoretically enabled impartial arbitration in religious conflicts. With the election of the BJP, it was feared that the same could be used to promote the interests of Hinduism and restrict the activities of other religious groups.

Given the crisis of secularism in India, Nepal stands as an interesting counterpoint because of its status as the only Hindu Kingdom in South Asia. When Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered the Kathmandu Valley in 1769, he proclaimed Nepal as *asal hindustān*, the true Hindu kingdom, and Hinduism became the new religious legitimation of the newly forged Nepali state (Gellner et al. 1997: 36). In 1990, a constitution was promulgated which, despite popular movements for secularism, maintained the status of Nepal as a Hindu Kingdom. Article 4 (1) of the 1991 Constitution states:

4. The Kingdom

- (1) Nepal is a multiethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom

In their commentary on the Nepalese Constitution, Dhungel et al. argue that the words ‘Hindu Kingdom’ was included to give continuity to the history of Nepal, although they admit that ‘the rationale behind this formulation may be questionable’ (1998: 76). By declaring Nepal as a Hindu state, the framers of the constitution were ‘reacting more to the fundamental conservatism of the population than in conformity with any desire to impose Hindu values’ (1998: 76). Article 4 has to be seen in conjunction with Article 19 (which protects the right to religion) and Article 2 (which defines the nation as constituted of Nepalese people irrespective of religion).

Article 19 of the Constitution states that:

(1) Every person shall have the freedom to profess and practise his own religion as handed down to him from ancient times having due regards to traditional practices:

Provided that no person shall be entitled to convert another person from one religion to another.

(2) Every religious denomination shall have the right to maintain its independent existence and for this purpose to manage and protect its religious places and trusts.

In the 1994 amended version of the 1965 Muluki Ain, the word ‘Hindu’ itself is absent from the section on religious conversion and the Code itself was silent on the subject of voluntary conversion. In their analysis, Dhungel et al. (1998) insist that the Nepalese constitution is effectively a secular constitution as “[n]o religion is sponsored or favoured by the state, none commanded, and none inhibited by the declaration in Article 4 of a Hindu Kingdom” (Dhungel et al. 1998: 179).

When the 1990 Constitution was being drafted, one of the major issues that was being debated by the Constitution Recommendation Commission (CRC) was the status of Hinduism as the state religion, which was first declared in the 1962 constitution by King Mahendra. The Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) began a movement for a secular constitution, which was strongly supported by the Dharmodaya Sabha (the National Buddhist Association or NBA). According to Harsha Muni Shakya, one of the leaders of the NBA, the first meeting was held at Dharmakirti Vihara (a Buddhist nunnery in Kathmandu), and representatives of all the religious groups were invited to attend. It was agreed that they would start a petition for secularism and that they would organize a rally to formally hand over the signed petition to the Constitution Recommendations Commission’s office.

The rally was held on Friday 22 June 1990, and the petition, which was signed by 10,780 people was handed over to the chairman of the CRC, Biswanath Upadhyaya. The media at that time drew a clear line between the Hindus and non-Hindus, portraying the non-Hindus as being on the side of secularism. In reality, the Muslims of Kathmandu did not participate in the rally. Harsha Muni Shakya reported that a group of Muslims attended the first meeting at Dharmakirti Vihara and gave their support to the secularism movement. However, they did not attend the subsequent meetings and were totally absent from the rally. In my interviews with the Muslims, nobody admitted participating in the rally. One man admitted that he had gone to Dharmakirti Vihara for the meeting for secularism, but when word about his participation got around, he faced harsh criticism from his fellow Muslims. When I asked him for the reason why the Muslims objected to his participation, he simply replied that the Muslims did not want to 'create trouble.'

According to Harsha Muni Shakya, there was a rumour that the Muslims have been enticed at the last minute by the Palace with assurances of protection for their non-participation in the rally. Others speculated that the Muslims were given special clearance to re-build the Nepali Jame mosque. However, one Muslim informant told me that the reason why the Muslims did not participate in the secularization movement was because they feared that secularization would mean heightened communal tensions. He gave the example of India where there are communal conflicts despite the country having secular constitution. Mention was also made of the protection that was given to the Muslims by King Mahendra, who personally intervened in the Hindu-Muslim clashes in the Tarai in 1971. It was generally felt by those who remember King Mahendra's support for the Muslims that it is better to have some protection under Hindu rule than to face uncertainty should Nepal adopt a secular constitution. The Muslims' trust and loyalty to the king is evident from the excerpt below:

Researcher: Nepal is the only Hindu Kingdom in the world. What is it like for Muslims to live here [in Kathmandu]?

Man: Here, it is very strict. But for us it is very good. King Birendra has done very well for us. He is impartial, but from outside, there are people who make conflict. Like from India, about the Babri masjid, like 2 or 4 people came. Pandits, bearded people, turban-wearing people... they criticize. If the Shiv Sena comes here, it will be the end. Otherwise, life here is very peaceful.

Translated transcript of a taped interview in Nepali

There is a strong belief among the Muslims that King is impartial, if not favourable, to Muslims. The threat, they insist, is external, "from outside" and more specifically "from India". Interestingly, the informant quoted above cites those who "make conflict" as Hindus ("pandits") as well as Muslims ("bearded people, turban-wearing people") who criticize the way things are in Nepal.

The rejection of secularism by the Muslims is not so much a rejection of the secularist ideology but rather an expression of their support for a Hindu monarchy which is believed to be the protectors of Muslims in Nepal. Given the choice between a Hindu system of government that has, so far, supported and protected them, and a secular system, the parameters of which are not clear and, has created a hostile environment for their Muslim brothers in India, the Muslims of Nepal opted for the former. However, it is the argument of this thesis that it is the monarchy that the Muslims chose to support, and the fact that he is Hindu is a secondary factor.

Hindu Tolerance: A Hindu response

The role of the Muluki Ain in upholding Hindu values was recently challenged in a letter addressed to the *Kathmandu Post*. It highlighted the case of a Muslim member of Parliament and former minister of state, the late Mirza Dilshad Beg. The writer asks:

Nepal is a Hindu country and the law of land is applicable to all communities. Muslims in Nepal do not have the freedom to have more than one wife as they have in "secular" India. [Mirza Dilshad Beg] was married to two girls, both Hindus who were born in Nepal who were converted to Islam. There's a law

against a person having more than one wife. Why was not Mirza prosecuted under Muluki Ain? Another law states that it is illegal to convert a Hindu to Islam or Christianity. How was Mirza able to convert two Hindu girls to Islam before getting married to them?

Ram Bahadur Thapa, *Kathmandu Post*, 6 July 1998

This letter implies that Nepal's Hindu identity is determined by the extent to which non-Hindus are made to follow Hindu laws. The writer is also at pains to point out that Nepal is not "secular" India (where Muslims are governed by a separate Muslim family law and are allowed to practise polygamy). Therefore, what is at stake is not just Hindu identity, but Nepal's identity as a Hindu kingdom and also the sanctity of the Muluki Ain as the legal code of Hindu Nepal.

Ram Bahadur Thapa's letter also raises two aspects of the law which pertains to Muslims, namely polygamy and conversion to Islam. Although Nepal does not allow for a separate Muslim family law, the Muluki Ain does express tolerance for deviant kinship and marriage patterns. For example in the Muluki Ain of 1854 the Muslims are the only group who are exempt from the prohibition of marrying patrilineal parallel cousins¹ (MA 1854 p 551, referred by Höfer 1979: 164). More recently, in the Muluki Ain of 1964 (amended in 1994) the section on marriage prohibitions broadly states that if the marriage is in accordance with the person's tradition of lineage and *jat* then he/she is exempt from punishment (Part 4 Section 15, no 10a, p 219). It is also significant that polygamy is not mentioned in the section on prohibited sexual relations in Muluki Ain of 1964. Therefore, although some of Ram Bahadur Thapa's views may be outdated, but they reflect the cultural stereotypes about Muslims - they have many wives, they convert Hindu women to Islam and then marry them.

The issue of conversion to Islam was also raised by Ram Bahadur Thapa. It is significant that Ram Bahadur Thapa wrote

¹ Father's brother's daughter

both [of Beg's wives were] Hindus who were *born in Nepal* who were converted to Islam. Another law states that it is illegal to convert a Hindu to Islam or Christianity. How was Mirza able to convert two Hindu girls to Islam before getting married to them?

(Ram Bahadur Thapa, *Kathmandu Post* 6 July 1998, italics added).

By raising the point that the girls were Hindus born in Nepal, he not only intended to show that an illegal conversion had taken place, but also that in marrying the Hindu girls, Beg had threatened the sanctity of Hinduism in Nepal.

This letter, which was published in the leading English daily in Kathmandu, was essentially a criticism of the secular application (or rather omission) of Hindu laws. For the Muslims who read it, it was reminder that they are at the mercy of the Hindu majority, and that Hindu tolerance of Muslim practices is a privilege, not a right, and cannot be taken for granted.

Hindu Secularism: The Muslim View

When I was in Nepal, I toyed with the idea of crossing the border into India for a short holiday. As I had never been there before, I asked my friend Ayesha for some advice. She is one of the few Muslim women I know who travels abroad on her own; she often goes to visit her daughter who is studying in Darjeeling, and her family antique business often takes her to places such as Tibet and India. But when she heard that I was thinking of going to India, she warned,

India is not like Kathmandu. In Kathmandu, it is normal for tourists to visit temples. When I was in India, I visited a Hindu temple. But when I was there, my tour guide told me not to tell anyone I am a Muslim. "Or else," he said, "You won't get out of here alive." When we were in front of the Hindu god statue, everyone was bowing to the god, you know. So I just dropped my handkerchief and picked it up, so at least it looked as though I had bowed. I was so frightened. I told my tour guide, "Never bring me to this kind of place again." India is like that. There are Hindu places where only Hindus live, and Muslim places where only Muslims live. It is not like that here, thank goodness.

I never did make it south of the border; a viral infection forced me to keep within the safe boundaries the Kathmandu Valley. But Ayesha's words echoed in my mind and I began to think about the paradox of Muslims feeling safe in a Hindu country but not in a secular one. Ayesha was not alone in her fear of India. Others I spoke to also echoed her sentiments. There were a lot of people who, although sad that I was ill, were relieved that I did not go to India on my own.

I have never been to India, and I cannot say firsthand how it feels to go to 'Muslim places where only Muslims live.' But I do remember the first time I arrived in Kathmandu. I did not know a single Muslim person then, and I asked Shree Krishna, my host, to bring me to a 'Muslim area'. Shree Krishna, who is a travel agent, was not sure what I meant. "You mean the mosque?" he asked. "Well, I know where that is," I replied, "but is there a Muslim neighbourhood? You know, where Muslims live?" Shree Krishna thought hard for a while, and then brought me to the bead market at Indrachowk. "This is a Muslim area," he said, "All these bead-sellers are Muslims." "Do they live around here?" I asked. After asking a few of them, he came back to me and said, "No, they only work here. They live in other places." With some hope I asked, "Any particular area?" Shree Krishna answered with a tired shrug, "No, they live all over Kathmandu."

The spatial distribution of Kathmandu Muslim society was embodied in the way that I did my fieldwork. Because there is no 'Muslim neighbourhood,' I had to travel to various places in the city to find my informants. Even in areas where there is a large number of Muslims, such as Baghbazar, the Muslim houses are not clustered together but rather interspersed between the houses of non-Muslims. It was a logistical challenge – I would plan my interviews according to geographical location, working out the best routes from A to B so as to maximise my time with my informants and minimize my travel time. Like other visitors to Kathmandu for the first time, I got lost many times in the labyrinth of narrow roads and endless doorways. Directions are always futile -- there are no door numbers or street names. And it did not help that Muslim houses are difficult to identify -- there are no signs or symbols over the door to indicate that it is a

Muslim household. Hindu or Buddhist households are a little easier to spot -- the doorstep is often caked in the red clay that is smeared on each morning, or the visitor is scrutinized by the eyes of the Buddha which are painted on each side of the doorframe. In order to go to a new informant's house, I had to ask the person to stand in his doorway at a stipulated time and then I would hope that I could recognize a Muslim man when I see him. I say this because it is not always easy to spot a Muslim in Kathmandu.

When I was staying with one of my Muslim host families in Baghbazar, our favourite pastime is to go up to the roof on Friday afternoons and look at the hundreds of Muslim men walking towards the mosque for prayers. The majority was dressed in a loose shirt and pants, indistinguishable from non-Muslims on the pavement (the only difference would be that the non-Muslims are the ones going against the flow). There were a few who have long beards, wear a turban, or are dressed in the *shalwar kameez* -- the familiar symbols of Islamic identity that is often portrayed in the media -- but they were the exception rather than the rule. Outside the boundaries of the mosque, it is hard to tell if someone is Muslim by physical appearance alone.

How then, do Muslims define their religious identity in a Hindu kingdom? In her paper on concepts of Hindu-Muslim identities and imagined communities in colonial India, Metcalf wrote:

In fixing a moral standard of behaviour, groups came to know not only what they were but what they were not. To imagine themselves, they had to imagine their opposite or opposites (1992: 235)

In Kathmandu, Muslim identity is built upon particular sets of markers that operate on the intra- and inter-religious levels. On the intra-religious level, the Muslims draw their religious identity from their observance, or at least their knowledge of, the five pillars of Islam. These are the *kalimah* -- the proclamation that there is no God except Allah and that Muhammad is his Prophet -- the five daily prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadhan, almsgiving to the poor and the Haj pilgrimage.

Then there are the markers of identity that are drawn from the Hindu milieu -- acts and omissions which define what they are not. These take on subtle forms, such as the absence of a *tika*² on one's forehead, or the one-handed greeting instead of the '*namaste*' which is done with both palms together. These were not obvious to me until one day when my Buddhist friend came to visit me at my informant's house. My friend had asked my informant why she did not wear a *tika*, to which she replied

We Muslims believe that our fate is written on our foreheads. When we are born, Allah writes our fate on our foreheads, so why would we spoil our own fate by putting something on it?

For Muslims, the *tika* is the main symbol of being a Hindu. A Muslim woman, who was angry at her husband, once said to me, "I told him, if he ever raises his voice to me again, I will leave him. Is this the behaviour of a Muslim? If he does it again, I'll leave this house. I'll put a *tika* on my forehead and call myself a Hindu!"³ On another occasion, I was walking on the street with my Muslim informant when he saw his friend who was across the street. His friend smiled and placed his palms together in a *namaste*, but instead of returning a *namaste*, my informant raised his right hand to his temple. When I asked him why he did that, he replied, "That is the Muslim way. We do not do like the Hindus. Our way is not *namaste*. Our way is a *salaam*."

The absence of a mark on one's forehead, a one-handed greeting: the significance of these subtle signs of Muslim identity has to be understood from the wider context of Hindu-Muslim relations in Kathmandu. Although the Muslims are socially marginalized and denied the right to practise certain aspects

² A *tika* is a mark made by anointing the middle of the forehead with sacred powder (usually vermillion) or paste. It has also become fashionable among women to wear the stick-on *tika* which is commonly sold in shops.

³ There is, however a slight gender bias in on the subject of bodily markings. Some Muslim men have a black mark on their forehead, which implies that the bearer prostrates himself in prayer so much that he bears the mark of his piety. However, the Muslims do not use the term *tika* to describe such markings – my informants insist there is no name for it, and preferred not to talk about it as it would imply either boasting about their own piety or judging that of others.

of their religion by the Hindu state, they have an attitude of practicality and fatalism when it comes to reflecting on their situation as a religious minority.

One day, while looking at photographs of my family, my Tibetan Muslim sister commented, ‘See, when you are at home, you wear your own [traditional] clothes. When you are here, you wear the *shalwar kurta*. That should be the way. Everything has to suit the time and place. In Nepal, the [men] wear the shirt and pants, the women wear the sari or the *shalwar kurta*. That is how we [Muslims] also should dress. Like this we can mix with everyone, and there will be no difference [between us].’

However, the importance of appearing ‘like everyone else’ goes beyond assimilation with the non-Muslims; it has become a marker of Muslim identity. One day, I had to interview a Muslim woman with whom I was not familiar. I turned up at her house, wearing a long skirt and long-sleeved shirt, and asked for the lady of the house. The woman who answered the door refused to let me in. “Tell her I am the Muslim girl who called just now. I have an appointment with her,” I insisted. The woman looked at me from head to toe and consulted someone inside the house. After a while, I was admitted inside and the lady with whom I was supposed to meet apologized. “My servant was confused. You say you are a Muslim girl yet you wear a skirt and shirt. Muslim girls should not wear skirts and shirts. Only *shalwar kurta* and sari. Those are the real Muslim clothes,” she explained. I then asked, “What about those who wear the *burqa* [full covering]? Isn’t that also Muslim attire?” The lady replied, “Of course it is, but we have to live here in Kathmandu. What will people say? If someone is wearing *burqa* here, people will feel scared.”

Physical appearance is an important, yet versatile marker of Muslim identity. At a secular level, it allows the Muslims to blend in with the Hindu population and not draw attention to themselves. Yet, at the same time, it can be appropriated and integrated into Muslim discourse to become a locally defined religious marker, as was the case in defining the appropriate attire for Muslims.

Mediated through the insecurity felt by Muslims about their relationship with the Hindus, this local marker overrides other markers of Muslim identity (such as the *burqa*).

On one occasion, my mother sent me some beef *rendang* (a spicy dish) from Singapore. I brought it over to my Muslim informant's house and we all sat down to enjoy it. "This is something you can't find here," I said, pointing to the beef. "Oh, this is a very staunch Hindu country!" my informant said between mouthfuls of the forbidden meat. "Doesn't it bother you that you can't eat beef?" I asked. "I really don't care," he replied. "If it affects the majority, why should we fight against it? Look, as long as it is *halal*, Allah says we can eat [it]. If it is written as *halal*, we have to eat it. In order to go to heaven, we should not eat *haram* meat. What is [the verse] I don't know. 'That which should not be eaten, we should not' something like that. Those who do not eat meat, that person is a vegetarian. Some eat only mutton. Some find pork tasteful, no? For some pork is not tasteful. Some should not eat meat, only vegetable... To each his own. Different kinds of thinking."

The cow is an important symbol of Nepal's Hindu identity (Michaels 1997: 80), and its sacred role is protected by the ban on cow slaughter which has been in place since 1854.⁴ In 1995, the Minister of Health, Padma Ratna Tuladhar, had made a speech in which he said that Muslims and Tamangs, who are traditionally beef-eaters⁵ were being denied their rights by the ban on cow slaughter. This remark was taken to imply that he was advocating cow slaughter and almost resulted in ethnic violence (Gellner et al. 1997: 37). The fear of provoking the anger of Hindus explains why my Muslim informant causally

⁴ In the 1854 Muluki Ain, the punishment ranged from a fine of 2 rupees for whipping a cow to life imprisonment in the event that a cow has been killed with intent (for the full list, see Höfer 1979: 219).

⁵ It should be noted that although the eating of beef is permitted for Muslims, is not a special requirement for Muslim rituals – none of the Kathmandu Muslims berated the fact that their religious practice is in any way compromised by the lack of beef. The idea that it is the 'traditional' food of Muslims should be looked at within the particular context within which it is expressed. In this case, is the right of Muslims to eat what is permissible for them that is violated by the law concerning cow slaughter, rather than the performance of Muslim religious practice.

dismissed the issue of cow slaughter. But the fact that it was said in a private, informal setting and among a Muslim audience shows that his sentiment goes beyond the avoidance of a sensitive issue. The use of, or rather, the attempt to use scripture to strengthen his position on cow slaughter suggests that the Muslims have adapted to the Hindu milieu, to the extent of justifying the state-imposed limitation on their diet using scripture.

Whether they like it or not, the collective identity of Muslims in Nepal is defined by that of the Muslims in India and Pakistan. When I was doing my fieldwork, the Muslims were complaining that they are accused of being sympathizers of Pakistan and being involved with the Pakistani Intelligence (ISI). The Muslims I lived with seemed to have a love-hate relationship with Pakistan. On the one hand, it is their immediate Islamic neighbour, whose TV channel they depend on for daily recitations of the Quran and for religious programmes. On the other hand, because of their religious dependence on Pakistan, the Muslims of Kathmandu are suspected to be pro-Pakistan and therefore a threat to Nepal and India. For this reason, the Muslims I spoke to were keen on distancing themselves from the political imbroglio between India and Pakistan. For example, one informant who listens to the recitations of the Quran on Pakistani Television every day, would complain, "Pakistan says it is a Muslim country, but they are not behaving like Muslims. Look at the fighting in Kashmir. It is giving Islam a bad name." One of the most damaging insults I have heard in Kathmandu is to call someone an agent for the Pakistani Intelligence (ISI). One man, who had recently migrated to Kathmandu from the Tarai, had raised the suspicion of the Kathmandu Muslims by being over-friendly with some of the powerful and rich Muslims. He was accused of being an ISI agent and thereby socially ostracized: no one would give their daughter to him or invite him to their homes.

The Islam that is presented is a tolerant and adaptive one which does not disturb the status quo. Dastider (2000) has called this the 'minority psyche,' the result of

having maintained such a dismal image in society for a long time, [that] 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. (Dastider 2000: 30).

Dastider was writing about Nepalese Muslim peasants who live near the Indian border, which has been plagued with sporadic communal clashes in the 1990's. In areas where they are the majority population -- and there are numerous villages and districts which have very substantial numbers of Muslims in the Tarai -- the Muslims are more assertive and therefore, more threatening to the Hindus in the area.

The case of Kathmandu, however, is different. Compared to the situation in the south, there have been no reports of communal conflicts in the capital, and Hindu-Muslim relations have so far been peaceful. The majority of Kathmandu-born Muslims have not experienced communal strife first-hand, but the threat of communal conflict is something that the Muslims of Kathmandu know all too well. Unlike Dastider (2000), I could find no 'psychological dilemma' among the Kathmandu Muslims. As a Muslim man once told me, "This is a strict Hindu country. But there are no fights here. Why? Because if we [Muslims] fight with the Hindus, we will be beaten." The fatalism in that statement belies the daily strategies employed by Muslims to define their religious identity that will not provoke or antagonize the Hindus.

The adjustments made to living with the Hindus -- for example, their physical appearance and diet -- have become markers of Muslim identity and are reinforced with scripture so as to appropriate what is essentially Hindu into

Muslim discourse, so much so that the topics of cow-slaughter and physical appearance are non-issues with the Muslims I talked to,⁶ and I was often scolded for trying to get them to talk about things that are 'not important.' However, I could not help but detect an underlying tone of caution: the dismissal of such issues as being 'not important' could well mean the opposite, and the reluctance to talk about them is a refusal to engage in what is essentially a sensitive and potentially dangerous issue. What is important (and people are more than happy to complain about) are issues such as employment and education, which various Muslim organizations are actively lobbying for on public platforms. These issues are also significant in that they are not overtly religious ones which run counter to Hindu sensitivities. The aim of these strategies -- the 'safety' that Ayesha was talking about at the beginning of the chapter - is not a given; it is constantly being negotiated through the words and actions of Kathmandu Muslims every day.

Conclusion

Madan (1997) argues that the crisis of secularism in India is due to the fact that India's religious traditions do not recognize the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. Without an ideology that Indians can identify with to support it, the secularist project in India cannot find legitimacy with India's multi-religious population. Interestingly, this argument was also used to justify the Hindu state in Nepal. In 1990, when the movement for secularism was gaining momentum, those that were fighting to retain the Hindu constitution argued that secularism would create a state of anarchy in Nepal, that fundamentalism would increase and the rights of religious minorities could no longer be protected by the state. In the end, Nepal managed to maintain its status as the only Hindu kingdom in the world, and so far, it has been able to keep the peace between religious groups. In June 2000, I watched with trepidation when the magazine *India Today* published 'The Nepal Gameplan', a leaked secret report on Pakistan's alleged

⁶ There were, of course, other issues that were considered 'more important' for Muslims, such as education, that were frequently discussed on public platforms.

anti-India activities in Nepal. The report was particularly damning for the Muslims in Nepal, some of whom were singled out in the report, with their full names, addresses and phone numbers published. What could have been an incendiary issue was handled skilfully by the Nepalese government, who responded by denouncing the Indian media for publishing propaganda to malign Nepal and pulling Nepal into its political conflict with Pakistan. The issue of Nepalese Muslims being involved in the anti-India campaign was downplayed, while the national media published the statements of Muslims who expressed their resentment at being unfairly implicated in the affair. The informants I contacted, some of whom were named in the report, insisted that no one had paid any attention to the report and dismissed it as yet another attempt by India to destabilize Nepal. "Stop worrying about us," they insisted. "We are okay." The Muslims, it would appear, are still being protected by the Hindu state and their national identity as Nepalese Muslims paramount over their alleged religious affiliation with Pakistan.

Varshney (1993) suggests that instead of looking at the issue of secularism simply as the separation between religion and the state, one should consider of varieties of secularism and look at how the idea of secularism is translated into policy. Perhaps, as Tambiah pointed out in his talk in 1997 at the London School of Economics, the issue for South Asian governments is not whether they should adopt a secular or a religious stance; it is finding a balance given the secular and religious forces that exist in such multi-ethnic, multi-religious countries. The Muslims in Kathmandu are only too aware of their status as a minority in a Hindu country. For them, the Hindu state represents the Hindu majority, and their survival depends on their ability to adapt and respond to the Hindu milieu.

Unlike the Muslims in Dastider's (2000) study, the Muslims in Kathmandu are not in any psychological dilemma about their position in a democracy. The idea of a secular Nepal is of little significance to most Muslims because they understand only too well the concept of democracy and majority rule. History has also shown that protection and support for Muslims have always

been provided by the Hindu state. Comparing their situation with that of the Muslims in India, they realize that it is not the system that matters, it is the benefit that they gain from it. None of the Muslims I spoke to consider India to be a secular country; it is a country 'where Muslims and Hindus fight', and that alone is enough of a warning to Muslims about the danger of any system that is akin to that of India's. Therefore, it is clear that the Muslims are not rejecting secularism as an ideology. The non-involvement of the Muslims in the movement for secularism has to be seen as part of a strategy to ensure what is in their best interest as a minority in a Hindu democratic country.

CHAPTER SIX

Religious conversion

This chapter looks at the impact that Nepal's prohibition of religious conversion and proselytization has had on the expression of religious identity.

Introduction

Anthropological literature on religious conversion is largely focused on the task of accounting for the different ways in which religious ideas are interpreted across different cultures. Most notable in this field are studies by Peel (1968, 1990), Fischer (1973) Horton (1971, 1975) and Hefner et al. (1993) on conversion to Christianity, and the work of Levtzion et al. (1979) on conversion to Islam. There have also been a number of studies which focus on conversion in different religious contexts. For example, the work of Rambo (1993) is innovative in the way it adopts an inter-disciplinary approach and presents case studies from different countries and religions, and in the volume edited by Oddie (1991) religious conversion movements are analyzed within the historical and political processes of South Asia.

The underlying issue in the study of religious conversion is the mutability of religious identity. Anthropologists and the missionaries alike have long observed the persistence of local cultures in the religious practices of converts, which has produced the idea that conversion is not an instantaneous, total transformation of religious identity, but rather a process through which the convert has to negotiate between the different markers of identity from both religions. The adoption, resistance or rejection of particular markers of religious identity is influenced by the society in which the conversion takes place, which is the main focus of this chapter.

In addition to the literature on religious conversion, the literature on 'cults' or 'new religious movements' (Dawson 1998) is also relevant for its focus on the relationship between religion and society. Control seems to be main issue in the debate on new religious movements: the control of the convert over his choice of

religion, that of the cult over the convert, that of society over the cult, and ultimately society's control over an individual. Basically, the term 'cult' is used to marginalize groups whose values or practices society regards as deviant. Deviance here is subjectively defined; this is usually the case when the cult espouses values that are contrary to those held by wider society. In the case of the Unification Church, members are required to take on new identities, abandon marriage and career plans and break away from their respective biological families, actions that challenge the foundations of society, such as kinship and social identity.

In dealing with the phenomenon of conversion to new religious movements, American society and in particular, the American media tapped into pre-existing fears of physical and ideological coercion and loss of control, thereby explaining the prevalent use of the term 'brainwashing' and 'mind-control.' The alleged power of these new religious movements can be seen as a 'symbolic construction ... that legitimates the kind of social control that the established institution feels compelled to exert' (Bromley, Busching and Shupe 1982: 310). The paranoia about conversion to new religious movements is also based on the assumption that identity is immutable. According to one parent of a man who converted to the Unification Church:

David had been subjected to sophisticated mind-control techniques... The Moonies we had met at camp were robots, glassy-eyed and mindless ... we took comfort in realizing that it was not our son ... but a diabolical force that had been implanted in his mind... (*Daily Mail*, 29 May 1978)

In this case, the conversion to the Unification Church resulted in a personality that was unrecognizable to the man's parents, so much so that it was easier to say he is not their son than to deal with the fact that their son has changed. The terms 'mind-control', 'robots' and 'mindless' clearly show that the power of self-determination is no longer with the convert, and that control lies with the cult leader¹.

¹ Barker (1984) is critical of the idea that the Moonies use brainwashing to gain new members. She finds that the majority of those who attend their introductory weekends do not end up joining the group, which suggests that there are other 'push' factors that cause people to join new religious movements.

In the early seventies, opposition to new religious movements was centred around ‘deprogrammers’, individuals who forcibly abducted members of non-traditional religions, locked them up in motel rooms, and assaulted their beliefs until they gave up their religious faith’ (Lewis 1995: 96). The elements of violence and coercion, which ironically, mirror that of the new religious movements themselves, were justified because they were seen to be essential in ‘rescuing’ the person from the clutches of the cult.

I have introduced the literature on new religious movements because there are parallels in the way that conversion to new religious movements is perceived in America and the way that religious conversion has been and is still being regarded in Nepal. The following pages will show the historical and legal aspects of religious conversion in Nepal and the effects they have on the nature and quality of religious conversion.

History of Religious Conversion in Nepal

Observers in all periods since Muslims entered South Asia have at least agreed that Muslim numbers in the region have increased by other than natural reproduction or immigration, that is by changes in social or religious belonging to which, following common usage in English, we may, in order to launch the present operation, apply the code word *conversion*.

Hardy 1979: 70

The history of conversion in India begins not with the first Muslims who crossed her borders or landed on her shores. Instead, it began in the late nineteenth century when the British began to take censuses of the population. Once the data was analyzed, it became “charged with political suggestiveness” (Hardy 1979: 69). It became clear, for example, that increases in the number of adherents to a particular religion were not simply due to natural rates of reproduction or immigration, neither were declines due simply to natural rates of mortality or emigration². This, coupled with the idea of democracy -- that the

² The exception being the partition of India in 1947, when the proportion of Muslims was halved from over 77 million (22% of total population) in 1941 to 35 million (9.91% of total population) (Oddie 1991: 256-8)

majority would rule – made any changes in the religious population a potentially volatile issue.

The censuses of India therefore became a barometer of change in the religious composition of the population, indicating great upheavals such as the partition of India in 1947 which led to the dramatic decrease in the number of the Muslim population and the mass conversion of Untouchables to Buddhism in the late 1950's which saw the number of Buddhists rise while that for Hindus fell (Oddie 1991).

Nepal is a Hindu Kingdom by virtue of its Civil Code, the Muluki Ain. The census shows that the majority of the population (over 85 per cent) are Hindu, thereby justifying the primacy given to Hinduism as a state religion. Because of this, changes in the religious composition, and in particular a fall in the percentage of Hindus, have serious implications for the status of Hinduism as the state religion in Nepal.

Muslims first came to Nepal by way of trade and the invitation of Malla kings during the fifteenth century. Although we have no records of conversion to Islam during that time, it has been established that in the early eighteenth century, Jesuit missionaries had already established a mission and converted 57 people to Christianity (Stephen 2000: 2).

The issue of religious conversion came to the forefront when Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered the Valley in 1769. In an attempt to protect his kingdom from what he saw was a foreign creed, he stripped the missionaries of the land and privileges that were given to them by the Malla kings and banished them as well as the local Christian converts. The Muslims, however, were spared. The reason for this is not clear from the history books, but two reasons are possible. Firstly, the Muslims had linguistic and other diplomatic skills that were useful to the new king, and secondly, they did not enter Nepal as missionaries but servants of the Malla court and thus were not seen as a threat to the Hindu religion. But religious conversion remained a serious issue as Francis Hamilton noted in 1803: "While at Kathmandu, several Hindus, of high caste, among our followers, chose to embrace the Musulman [sic] faith, and thereby subjected themselves to severe restrictions and disgrace" (Hamilton 1819: 37-8, quoted in Gaborieau 1995: 215).

The need to protect the Hindu populace from the influence of other creeds was codified in the Muluki Ain of 1854 where it is stated that

Brahmin, including Tāgādhāri [wearers of the Holy cord] and matwāli [alcohol-drinkers] who have received [initiation], when they listen to the gairhale [respective] mantra, will recite the mantra that was given to them by their guru according to the tradition of their forefathers. One who does not recite the mantra of his forefathers but receives the nāstik [atheistic] Buddhist path, jhanna pamna³ he will be punished 50 rupees. If one eats the rice given by jhanna panna, and gives water to others, he should be punished according to Ain, all his rights and properties be confiscated, his holy thread will be removed and he will be degraded [to a lower caste].

Muluki Ain 1854 p 389 (translated from an extract in Nepali in Höfer p 158)

Although not explicit, the above shows that the traditional religion of Hindus (at least those who fall into the category of wearers of holy cord and non-alcohol-drinkers) was not to be abandoned, i.e. conversion was not allowed for these castes even to Buddhism. A convert not only faces a monetary fine but also degradation of his caste status if he were to eat the cooked rice given by *jhanna panna*, which is a reflection of the polluting status of other religious groups at the time. It is also interesting that in the 1854 Muluki Ain, it is forbidden for the Brahmin to convert to Buddhism, whereas the Code is silent on conversion to Islam or Christianity.

More than a century later, the section on religious conversion in the 1961 Muluki Ain, was more comprehensive and explicit in its wording:

Spreading *kabirpanthi*, Christian, Islamic and other irreligious and foreign creeds; delivering, for the purpose of spreading them, speeches which may corrupt the religion of the people; converting any member of the Brahman caste or any of the castes from whose hand water is accepted; is prohibited. If

³ The term 'janna' (archaic) or its modern equivalent 'janana' means 'by birth', or 'lineage'. 'Panna', according to the Nepali dictionary is an expert, but it is also an archaic term used to describe temple guardians, specifically the Newar (Buddhist) priestly castes.

anybody does so or attempts to do so, this person as well as the person who has abandoned his traditional religion to adopt one of the abovementioned creeds are deemed to have committed an offence. If the courts, the police of the local authorities do not lodge a complaint against them, the government must lodge a complaint and inquire into the case (Code 1952:vol 5, no. 29, 15)

Quoted in Gaborieau 1995:215

In this version of the Muluki Ain, no mention is made of Buddhism, but Christianity and Islam are singled out as 'irreligious and foreign' creeds which 'corrupt the religion of the people'. This shows the subjectivity of religious categories in Nepal; Buddhism which was once considered a threat to Hinduism is now appropriated by Hindus as a part of Hindu religion, with Buddha as one of the many Hindu deities. In the 1952 Muluki Ain, the prohibition on conversion is not only applicable to the Brahman caste but is extended to all castes from whose hand water is accepted. The Code also shows a more comprehensive approach to the conversion process, punishing both the convert and the proselytizer. It also punishes the act of attempting to convert, which reflects concern about the effect of missionary activities on the Hindu populace. The stress on traditional religion is common to both Codes, which implies that the ban on religious conversion is to preserve the status quo and more importantly, to protect the sanctity of the higher castes. The inclusion of the final clause that allows the government supra-legal powers to investigate matters of religious conversion illustrates the seriousness of the threat of conversion to the Hindu promulgators. In the 1963 edition of the Muluki Ain, it is stated that:

Inside Nepal, nobody is allowed to preach creeds like Islam and Christianity which destroy the *dharma* practised by the Hindu people; or to convert to those creeds people practising the Hindu *dharma*. If anyone attempts to convert people, he should be imprisoned for three years; if he has actually [converted people] he should be imprisoned for six years; and then if he is a foreigner, expelled for the country. If anyone practising the Hindu *dharma* becomes converted to any of the abovementioned creeds, he should be imprisoned for one year, then if he is a foreigner, he should be expelled from the country. If he has only attempted to become converted, he should be punished by a fine of a hundred rupees. When

someone has converted, the conversion is nullified and he remains in the Hindu *dharma*. (Code 1963: no. 1, 223)

(Quoted in Gaborieau 1995: 215-6)

In this edition of the Muluki Ain, the offence of religious conversion is broken down to its constituent parts, with the heaviest punishment -- six years' imprisonment -- reserved for the proselytizer who has successfully converted a Hindu. The Muluki Ain also became more thorough in its protection of Hindus from proselytisers; all who practise Hindu dharma are protected, regardless of caste or nationality. The approach to the conversion process is comprehensive. For the first time; the attempt made by a Hindu to convert to another religion is regarded as an offence. It is also stated that religious conversions are not recognized by law, and that conversion does not alter the religious identity of Hindus in the eyes of the law. In the editions of the Muluki Ain up to 1990, the word '*dharma*' is used not only for the religion of the Hindus but also the Buddhists as well, which implies that Buddhism, once considered an atheistic religion by the 1854 Muluki Ain, was gradually co-opted into the Hindu fold. This can be contrasted with the case of Islam and Christianity, which remain outside the pale and are considered a threat to the Hindu religion.

Considering the fact that the Hindu state was upheld in the 1990 Constitution, any references to Hinduism in this section on the right to religion are noticeably absent. However, the wording of section 1 of Article 19 (see Chapter Five) shows that the promulgators of the Constitution are concerned with the idea of maintaining religious boundaries and the status quo, as it upholds 'traditional practices' and 'religion as handed down to him from ancient times.' To this end, the Constitution upholds the prohibition on conversion as the proviso to Section 1 of Article 19 shows. According to the Commentary on the Nepalese Constitution, "the proviso seeks to prevent fraud, force and inducement, not to prevent one from voluntarily changing his faith" (Dhungel et al. 1998: 183). Although this is inferred from the omission in section 1 of any reference to the convert, it marks a significant change in the religious policy of Nepal as it implies more religious freedom for the individual. These changes were also reflected in the subsequent amendments to the Muluki Ain:

Chapter 19, Section 1 (Amended in V.S. 2048 or 1991 AD)

No one is to spread any religion which affects the religion of another, or to convert a person from one religion to another. If an attempt is made to do so, it is punishable with up to three years imprisonment and if conversion has occurred, [the punishment] is up six years imprisonment. If the person is a foreigner, after such punishment, that person will have to be expelled from Nepal.

Section 1A (Added in V.S. 2048 or 1991 AD]

If anybody performs any activities which affect the religious practices of another person or religious place, he will be imprisoned up to three years or up to 3000-rupee fine or both.

Translated from Nepali, Muluki Ain published 2052 (1995 AD) 21st edition

On the subject of religion, it is clear that the language of the Muluki Ain has undergone a change compared to the previous editions. In keeping with the ‘Hindu secularism’ that is espoused in the 1990 Constitution, the wording of the Muluki Ain shows no partiality towards any religion, although the spirit of the earlier Codes in maintaining religious boundaries and protecting the sanctity of established religions is kept very much alive.

Changes in the religious composition of Nepal

Table 5 Population of Nepal by Religion 1952/54—1991
(adapted from the 1991 Population Monograph of Nepal: 311)

Year	Hindus	Buddhists	Muslims	Jain	Christian	Others
1952/54	88.87%	8.59%	2.54%	—	—	0.01%
1961	87.69%	9.25%	2.98%	0.01%	—	—
1971	89.39%	7.50%	3.04%	0.05%	0.02%	—
1981	89.50%	5.32%	2.66%	0.06%	0.03%	2.43%
1991	86.51%	7.78%	3.53%	0.04%	0.17%	0.14%

The above figures show that with the liberalization of Nepal’s religious policy, there is a marked change in the composition of the population, especially between 1961 and 1991. Although Hinduism is still the dominant religion in Nepal, the increase in the proportion of Christians and Muslims is noticeable.

Between 1961 and 1991, the percentage of Muslims rose by 0.55 per cent, the highest increase compared with other religious groups in the census, while the percentage of Christians rose by a modest 0.15 per cent. However, if we consider the fact that there were only 458 Christians in 1961 compared with 31,280 in 1991, the increase is actually sixty-eight times, making it the fastest growing religion in Nepal. These increases correspond with a drop of 1.18 per cent and 1.47 per cent in the percentage of Hindus and Buddhists respectively.

As was the case in India, the data presented in the censuses of Nepal indicated more than just changes in the religious composition of the population. In the case of Christianity, the dramatic increase in the number of Christians shows that conversions have occurred despite the prohibitions on religious conversion and proselytization which have been in place since 1854. The case for Islam is slightly different. Because Muslims have settled in Nepal for centuries, the increase in the number of Muslims is the result of various contributing factors, such as a high birth rate, immigration from places such as Tibet, Kashmir and India and religious conversion.

It is possible that the rise in the number of Buddhists, Christians and Muslims between 1981 and 1991 is a reflection of the changes in the expression of religious identity of these groups. In the case of Buddhism, which increased by 2.46 per cent between 1981 and 1991, the increase was partly due to various religious awareness programs that were conducted prior to the census enumeration, which resulted in more people declaring themselves as Buddhists (as opposed to Hindus). Although I am not aware of such organized programs among Christians and Muslims in Nepal, it is possible that these groups were internally mobilized to assert their identity vis-à-vis the Hindus in an attempt to gain religious and political recognition.

The threat of religious conversion to the Hindu majority was especially felt after the 1991 census, which showed with a fall of 2.99 per cent in the Hindu population between 1981 and 1991, while there were increases in the number of Buddhists, Muslims and Christians during the same period. This suggests that despite the ban on proselytization, conversions were still occurring in Nepal, and that it is changing the religious composition of the country. During the debate

about secularism which preceded the drafting of the 1990 Constitution, religious conversion was a key issue raised by those who opposed secularism. A newspaper article reported:

With no Hindu tradition of conversion, they [who oppose secularism] fear secularism would merely help Muslims and Christians spread their faith. International human rights organizations have long criticized Nepal for jailing people convicted of proselytizing, most of them Christian school-teachers.

“We know Hinduism that exists in the kingdom of Nepal cannot be compared with orthodox Islam practised in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but it becomes difficult for us to convince our government back home,” said a Western diplomat.

Hindus see no human rights violation, saying they object to evangelists because they criticize other people’s religions. There is already public unease over a decision by Nepal’s interim government this month to free or drop charges against more than 100 people convicted or accused of proselytizing.

“The age-old Hindu tradition of respecting other religions has left no provision to lure others to the fold,” said university lecturer Sharad Chandra Wasti, 35. “Thus conversion continues to be a one-way traffic, leaving Hindus vulnerable”.

The vulnerability comes partly from the caste system, which defines a Hindu’s place in society from birth. This means Hinduism is inherited, not preached, while Hindus born into the bottom of the hierarchy are easily wooed by Islamic and Christian promises of social mobility. Achut Raj Regmi, a government minister.... [fears] that evangelists could bid for converts with scholarships, medical treatment or even cash bribes.

Dhruba Adhikary

From Reuters in *The Nation*, a Thai newspaper

Tuesday 26 June 1990

The writer raised two important issues in the above extract. Firstly, he pointed out that Hinduism is ‘inherited,’ which implies that that Hindu identity is defined by birth. The primacy of Hindu identity echoes the early editions of the Muluki Ain where conversions of Hindus is not recognized by law; a person who

is born Hindu remains a Hindu regardless of whichever religion he professes. This, in fact, was the motivation and rationale for the *shuddhi* movement in India in the late nineteenth century, which sought to re-convert Hindus who had become Muslims, in an attempt to restore Hinduism in India (Jones 1989). However, the missionary efforts of the Arya Samaj in performing re-conversions was met with resistance from the orthodox Hindu community who refused to interact with the newly purified Hindus. Hindu identity that was defined by birth, it appears, was not as strong as the polluting effect of having transgressed Hindu taboos of commensality with people of other religions⁴.

The second issue, which is closely related to the first, is that Hinduism is not a missionary religion. Because Hinduism can only be inherited, the corollary of this is that there is no need for missionary work as Hindus are born, not made. In Nepal, where Hindus have enjoyed the protection of the law with regards to religious conversion, the idea of a secular state raised worries about proselytization once state protection of Hinduism is removed. Because Hinduism in Nepal has 'no tradition of conversion', the Hindu community is vulnerable to the influence of Christian and Muslim missionaries, whose activities, it was feared, would increase under a secular state.

The writer in the article also mentioned that the vulnerability stems from the caste system, and in particular those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy who are considered easy targets for the missionaries who promise social mobility. Although this is an oft-quoted reason for religious conversion, in the case of Nepal, because little is known about the composition of religious converts, this theory remains untested. Schreib (1989) estimates that there are about 2500 Catholics outside Kathmandu Valley, mostly ethnic tribals in eastern Nepal. Unfortunately, to protect their identities, she did not name the tribes nor the villages that she visited, thereby making it difficult to analyze the types of conversions that are occurring.

The study of religious conversion in Nepal is hindered by the sensitivity of the issue. It is estimated that up to 1991, between 300 and 400 Christian

⁴ For a detailed study of the *shuddhi* movement in Mewat in the early twentieth century, see also Mayaram (1997) *Resisting Regimes* pp 64-71

pastors have been convicted or imprisoned for breaking the law on religious conversion.⁵ In addition, the prosecution of proselytizers is not confined to Nepalese; in 1989, the *International Herald Tribune* reported that two Westerners were tried on charges of proselytizing Christianity in Eastern Nepal. In her interviews with the religious converts, Schreib (1989) took into account the converts' fear of persecution and used pseudonyms to protect their identity. Although the article by Stephen (2000) shows a more open attitude by the converts, in the final paragraph, he writes

Nepali missions leaders say their goal is to 'remain faceless' to be of use to Christians throughout Asia. That unusual quality is something Nepali Christians possess in abundance.

The intent of that statement may have been to show the transnational aspect of Christian mission, but it also highlights the unique character of Nepalese converts, an issue I will return to in my analysis of Muslim converts.

However, it appears that the conviction of proselytizers is limited to Christians – to my knowledge, there are no Muslim proselytizers who have been or are in prison. This implies that Christianity is still considered a 'foreign' religion and its missionary activities a threat to the Hindu populace. At the same time, it suggests that Muslims are either shown tolerance by the state, or, that they are simply not as active in proselytization in Nepal. It is my opinion that the situation in Nepal with regards to the Muslims is a combination of both factors, as the following sections will show.

The difference between Christians and Muslims can partly be explained by the different historical trajectories of Christianity and Islam in Nepal which have given rise to different expressions of religious identity. After the expulsion of Christians from Nepal in the late nineteenth century, Christianity in Nepal went into a hiatus, re-emerging only in the latter part of the twentieth century, when missionaries were again allowed into Nepal. In this sense, Christianity is

⁵Source: Musselman, Greg (1998) Christianity in a Hindu Kingdom. Internet address: <http://www.cbn.org/newsstand/csn/981029>. Musselman did not reveal the source of this data. In another field report submitted in 1989, between 190 and 200 have been convicted of breaking the law on religious conversion, and that 30 were actually in jail, with an undeclared number on probation or bail awaiting trial (Schreib 1989).

relatively new to Nepal. They were first given recognition in the census in 1971, and Christians today are mostly first generation converts. This is a reflection of the change in Nepal's religious policy, which officially allowed the re-entry of Christian missionaries in the 1950's. At that time, proselytization was still illegal according to the Legal Code, but the missionaries were allowed to open schools in Kathmandu. In 1951, Fr. Marshal D. Moran opened the primary wing of Jesuit Educational Institute in Godawari, and in 1954, the St. Xavier School was opened in Jawalakhel. Up to 1990, the fear of persecution and the lack of an organized church have kept Christianity underground; congregations are held in private homes and rented halls with no signboards to mark Christian prayer. Also, because foreign priests cannot be seen engaging in proselytization, it is up to the convert to initiate missionary activities and organize the local congregations. Under these conditions, the local convert is both the church and missionary.

Muslim converts in Nepal however, are products of a different trajectory. A person who converts to Islam becomes part of an already established Muslim society. Worship for these Muslims is a public affair - the communal Friday prayers which is enjoined upon all male Muslims is a time when converts are introduced to and mingle with the Muslim population, an event which is not always welcomed by the born Muslims. These local Muslims realize the ambivalent relationship that Muslims have with the Nepalese state; some feel that the relative protection they have enjoyed so far is due to the fact that they do not engage in activities – proselytization in particular - which challenge the Hindu hegemony. Therefore, Muslim converts face a mixed reaction from the born Muslims, as the case studies that follow will show. The distance between converts and born Muslims is a reflection of insecurity that is felt by the Muslims about their status in the Hindu state. However, the distance is also maintained by some of the converts themselves, who do not want to cause trouble to the Muslim population. This shows that the convert not only internalizes Muslim practices and principles, but also the mindset of a religious minority that has a precarious relationship with the state.

However, although the internalization of a minority mindset is true of both Christians and Muslims, there are salient differences in the way that these

converts deal with the issue of being a religious minority. “Nepali Christians find that their status as a religious minority gives a strong incentive to stick together because discrimination and official harassment still take place” (Stephen 2000)⁶.

Unlike the Christian converts, Muslim converts are not united by their common status. In fact, the converts I spoke to hardly know each other and little interaction with each other except during the communal prayers. The reason for this is partly because Muslim society in Kathmandu is not a mission society; it simply does not have the infrastructure to provide support to the converts. As one of the committee members of the mosque commented:

For [conversion] there is no system. There are lots of people who want to become Muslim. If we can organize well for them, then who will become Christians? Muslims will be more! The main thing we need is money, isn't it? House, money, library, school... we have to feed and clothe them. There is nothing [for them]. There is no employment, so they have to be given jobs. [The mosque] is not able to provide these, otherwise more people will come to Islam. For their stomachs, our own Muslims go to other religions. But it's like that. It is all for their stomachs...

Conversion and Economic Opportunity

The Muslims I spoke to were worried about the dismal economic condition of the Muslims in Nepal. The worry is not simply about the livelihood of Muslims, it is also about the protection of Muslim faith from proselytizers who use social and economic enticements. Two groups are often singled out as the ones who use money and other benefits to lure people into converting: Christians and Qadianis⁷. The Christians are by far the most obvious threat to Islam; as the committee member above admits (albeit indirectly), the Muslims do not have the funds to bring others into the Muslim fold. The Christians, on the other hand,

⁶ It is interesting to note that Nepali Christian society, as it matures and grows in size, is now splitting into various sub-groups which have their own unique identity and ethos. Economic stratification is now also evident among the various Christian groups, some with more funding than others (Stephen 2000). The idea of Christian solidarity is therefore only a useful concept for the expression of their minority status and does not necessarily reflect the actual situation on the ground.

⁷ The name comes from the town of Qadian in Punjab, India, the birthplace of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement.

have set up schools and health facilities which enable them to reach out to potential converts.

The Qadianis, however, are considered more insidious simply because they are more difficult to identify. The group has faced persecution in countries such as Pakistan, where they are not recognized as part of mainstream Muslim society. In Kathmandu, the way that the term 'Qadiani' is used is similar to the way that the term 'cult' is used in the media during 1970's America. Among the accusations made of the Qadianis, the most common are that they "adulterate the *kalimah* and say that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is the Prophet of Allah", "they do not pray to the Ka'ba but to Qadian" and that "they declare themselves as God". For the Kathmandu Muslims, these are serious challenges to the foundations of Islam. Firstly, the Prophet Muhammad is widely regarded as the Beloved of Allah and the last Prophet of Islam, and any suggestion that another has replaced him is tantamount to sacrilege. The status of the Ka'ba, as the central focus of all Islamic prayer has also been challenged by the Qadianis who suggest an alternative centre – Qadian. In this way, the Qadianis are operating on the same level as religious cults did in the West in the 1970's – they subvert and challenge established social values and religious ideas, and thereby pose a direct threat to mainstream society.

The following is a cautionary tale that I often heard in Kathmandu. This version was told to me by a man in his early twenties, who wanted to highlight the fragility of converts:

There was a man called Kabir who used to stay near Kel Tol (near Indrachowk). He and his family were low caste Hindus, and they made their living selling *momos* (steamed dumplings) by the roadside. When they converted to Islam, the mosque committee decided to help them and they were given a shop space at the building near the mosque. However, if you are to ask them anything about Islam, they would not know anything – only that it is good. They later became Qadianis, and were forced to leave the business premises. They were no longer regarded as Muslims to the Muslim community. No one spoke to them. Later, they wanted to return and renounce their Qadiani identity, but no one believed them. During Ramadan, Kabir and the male members of his family went to the mosque to pray, but were beaten

by some of the elder Muslims at the mosque, and were banished from there. The family also has unmarried daughters but now no one will marry them. So they are neither here nor there – neither Muslims nor Hindus.

There are two factors about converts that are alluded to in the above story. Firstly, the motive of the conversion is questioned - Kabir and his family were enticed by the possibility of getting a shop space for their *momo* business. Secondly, the fact that the shop space was taken away when Kabir and his family became Qadianis shows that economic benefits are contingent upon conversion and adherence to Islam. This implies that economic opportunity is used as a tool to punish as well as to entice converts. The centrality of economic opportunity in Muslims' discourse about conversion is symptomatic of the economic condition of Kathmandu and of Nepal in general. Although the converts themselves might resent the idea, many people regard poverty as the main cause for religious conversion – 'the stomach first, and then religion' as one of my informants used to say.

Conversion Narratives

Until I actually met one, Muslim converts in Kathmandu were like mythical creatures – spoken about in mixed tones of caution and pride, alluded to in stories about bravery and tragedy of life in a Hindu Kingdom. The converts were usually unnamed in these stories, and it took me months to match the stories to the faces I later came to know. The converts themselves were apprehensive about meeting me. The reason most often given for a cancelled appointment was that they felt that I should meet someone else who was a 'better' Muslim, who knew more about Islam than they did. Perhaps it was because I am a Muslim, and they felt that I would be judging them on their knowledge about Islam. Or it could be that they were worried that I might expose their identity and it might get them in trouble with the law. After months of waiting, being refused interviews and cancelled appointments, I managed to persuade a few converts to talk to me, but it was not without reservations on their part. I was asked who my sponsors⁸

⁸ They were worried that I might be a government spy who will expose their identities.

were, where I would publish my work, whether I would show them my work when it is finished. Above all, they were worried about their privacy, and requested that I use pseudonyms and that I change various aspects about their life which could reveal their identity. In the case studies that follow, I have done as they requested.

In this section, I shall present the life history of two Muslim converts who live in Kathmandu. These life histories have been selected for the very different methods by which they were collected. In the first case, the convert's life history was pieced together through conversations and electronic correspondence that took place over four years. The second one was collected during a recent trip to Kathmandu where I had a long interview with the convert and supplemented his life history narrative with information I gathered from interviews with his relatives and also other Muslims who knew him.

Case 1: Basanta

I first got to know about Basanta from a rumour that was going around my circle of Newar friends. They heard that there is a Newar Muslim working in a photography shop and they suggested that I try to meet him. One day, with the address of the shop in hand, I decided to try my luck. At that time, I did not know Basanta's name, so I asked the man behind the counter if I could speak to the Muslim who was working there. The man, who happened to be the owner, just smiled and asked me how I got the information. After hearing my story, he warned me that religion is a sensitive issue, and promised to ask the convert if he would speak to me. Then he disappeared behind a door and emerged a few minutes later with another a small-built man with Tibetan features. He eyed me suspiciously and asked me what I wanted. I explained to him that I am a researcher and that I am there to interview converts. "Give me your phone number. I will call you," he said. And that was the end of my first meeting with Basanta. A few days later, Basanta called and we arranged to meet in front of the mosque.

Basanta apologized if it was difficult for me to find him. He explained that the owner of the photography shop is a Christian convert who is very protective of him. "We are both converts, you see, so we look out for each other,"

he said with a smile. At first, Basanta was dismissive of my research in religious conversion in Kathmandu. He simply did not see the point of talking to converts when it is such a sensitive and personal subject. But like most Nepalese, he was a most gracious host and promised to help me in whatever way he could. Basanta was not comfortable talking about his life history. He often brushed away questions about his past, saying that it was 'nothing special'. Instead, inchoate references about the past would come up in our conversations and it took some persuasion to get him to explain them. The following is pieced together from our conversations while I was in Kathmandu in Nov 1996, March-June 1997, Oct 1998 – September 99 and also our email correspondence. Where Basanta is quoted, it is from two main sources: transcripts of our conversations which were recorded in my journal and his e-mail correspondence.

Basanta's late father was a high-caste Newar trader who travelled between Lhasa and Kathmandu. He married a Tibetan woman in Lhasa and the marriage was blessed with four children - two sons and two daughters who were all born in Lhasa. The marriage, however, did not survive and Basanta's parents separated, but not before sending all four children to Darjeeling to study. After the Chinese take-over of Tibet, his mother settled in Kalimpong and his father, in Kathmandu. After a few years of study in Darjeeling, his father who had remarried summoned Basanta and his elder brother, Ratna, to Kathmandu. It was there that Basanta finished his high school education.

Basanta's father was a strict Newar Buddhist. In a conversation we had while on a tour of a Newar village, Basanta recalled the time when a low-caste person came to his house to hand over something to his father. At the time, his father was in the prayer room. When the low-caste man entered the room, Basanta's father shouted angrily at the low-caste man to get out. He then ordered Basanta to get cow-dung to purify the room. "Cow dung to clean a room, can you imagine it?" Basanta asked in disbelief. "Why not?" I challenged him. "The Hindus believe that cow dung is sacred, I've heard that it even has anti-bacterial properties." He gave me a look of disbelief and replied, "But cow dung!"

Life in Kathmandu was hard for the two boys. In another e-mail, Basanta wrote

[It was] nothing to do with our stepmother, she was kind and nice but it was our father who made our living tough with him. My brother left first to live with his friends and after a year I too left my father's place and stayed with my friends. From my father's side there were not many relatives and then we were not welcomed to their places because we were crossbreeds and nobody cared what we did.

Ratna, Basanta's elder brother, had a reputation as a heavy drinker and was always getting involved in fights. Then, one day, he came by the teashop where Basanta and his friends usually hung out and they noticed a change in him. Not only did Ratna stop drinking and fighting; he seemed transformed in his outlook and demeanour. "He started [talking about] life, the reality of life and the hereafter. We never heard those things in other religions. He was a very good talker. He can convince anybody. Once there were two girls in the shop. Christian girls. [Ratna] convinced her so much that her mind was changed. And her friend came and asked us "Where is your friend? Your friend has brainwashed my friend!" He was a very powerful talker. Poor us. We are in Islam because of that," Basanta said laughing. "My brother used to read [the Quran and Hadith⁹] to us. I don't know, maybe we got hypnotized or something," said Basanta.

At the time, there were seven of them (including Basanta) who met regularly to listen to Ratna speak about Islam. In the only taped interview I had with Basanta, I asked him who taught him how to pray. "Nobody taught us how to pray. We see the book. Hindi booklets. After a while, we started to pray with the congregation, and then you know it. You're used to it. First time, I went every *maghrib*¹⁰ in the mosque. I see somebody's *wuzu*¹¹ and tried something like that," he said with a laugh. "It's completely informal, you know. Other Muslims, when we meet them, they ask, "How did you get converted? " Like it's a big ceremony, you know, like someone says "*La ila ha illallah*¹²" and then I follow "*La ila ha illallah*"? Should there be a grand ceremony for converting?"

⁹ Traditions according to the Prophet Muhammad.

¹⁰ Evening prayers at sunset.

¹¹ Ablutions.

¹² Translated from the Arabic: "There is no God except Allah". This is part of the *kalimah shahadat* which is a proclamation in Arabic usually declared by the convert at the point of conversion.

It was 1979 when the seven new converts started to go to the mosque for prayers. In the same year there was a student movement for democracy that was crushed by general referendum, and a mood of fear and uncertainty hung in the air. Some of the Muslims at the mosque were happy to see the new converts and invited them to their homes. But there were also those who were scared and even angry that converts dared to turn up at the mosque. They were scared of taking on trouble at a time of uncertainty. Around the time that they started going to the mosque, Basanta recalled a local newspaper which published the headline “Nau Naya Miya.”¹³ However, the story that ran underneath the headline had nothing to do with the converts and it did not seem to arouse the interest of the local population.

One day, his mother came to Kathmandu to look for her sons. Basanta wrote, “By this time, both of us were already in Islam soul-deep. She found us and that was enough for her. I have been living with my mother since then. She follows her religion, we follow our own. ‘Unto you, your religion and unto mine, my religion.’¹⁴” Despite their religious differences -- Basanta’s mother is a Buddhist -- they are very close and supportive of each other. Basanta’s house is testament to the two different religions living under the same roof. In his mother’s room, there is an elaborate altar with candles, *thankas*¹⁵, Buddha statues and garlanded pictures of the Dalai Lama. In contrast, Basanta’s room is simply furnished, with a table, two cupboards full of books and clothes and a bed. A closer look at the books reveals his interest in Islam, Tibet and crossword puzzles.

(B: Basanta, R: researcher)

B: ... According to the law, whosoever preaches religion, like he converted through me, should I be apprehended, I will be in for 12 years. And converts will be in six to 2 years. Six to 2 years. I believe it is six to 2 years.

R: Six to two years?

¹³ Translated from the Nepali: Nine New Muslims.

¹⁴ A quote from the Quran.

¹⁵ Scroll paintings.

B: Six months to two years.

R: Oh right.

B: If I declare that will be it. Big problem.

R: If you declare. What do you mean?

B: I am a Muslim. If I declare completely.

R: To everybody?

B: No, not like that. Declaration means I want to change everything. My name and everything. Social status, everything. If you do that, then they, the law will come to you. We are not in politics, we are not in big business, we have nothing to do in governmental things, we have nothing we have to declare, we don't have to try to convince others.

Basanta often accompanies his mother on her pilgrimages to Buddhist holy places while she will only shop for and cook *halal*¹⁶ food for her son. Basanta is particularly proud of the fact that every day during the month of Ramadan¹⁷ she wakes him up in the early hours and prepares a hearty morning meal for him. "She will even nag me to wake up and eat. She does not want me to be weak from hunger during the day," he recalls with a smile. Basanta is not married, despite pressure from his friends and his mother. "Muslims will give their daughters to converts easily, but I chose not to get married," he explained. "I got Islam and I got everything. I can achieve nothing greater than this in my whole life."

In the early 1980's, Basanta's brother married an American woman and moved to the US. During the early years, communication between Basanta and his brother was mainly through the occasional letter or phone-call. Two years ago, after buying a computer, Basanta has been writing to his brother via e-mail. Through this medium, Basanta has observed that his brother is no longer interested in spiritual matters. In a conversation I had with him, he said rather

¹⁶ That which is permissible in Islam.

¹⁷ During this month in the Muslim calendar, Muslims have to abstain from food and drink from dawn to dusk.

sadly, “His e-mails are all about his car, paying taxes, his kids,” he commented, “Nothing about the hereafter, nothing about the spiritual.”

When I left Kathmandu in October 1999, of the original group of seven, there were only two converts who still proclaimed themselves as Muslims, Basanta being one of them. The other convert is also a Newar who is married to a Buddhist woman. He and Basanta have been good friends even before their conversion to Islam and have remained so till today. “All we have is each other,” Basanta said to me. “If any one of us should die, we will make sure that the other is given a proper Muslim burial at the Muslim cemetery at Swayambhu. Just don’t let them cremate us, that is all.”

Analysis

The main obstacle I faced in writing Basanta’s life history is the number of taboo subjects that I was not able to pursue, either with Basanta or any of the few Muslims who knew him and were willing to talk about him. It was almost as though they had a standard story-line about how Basanta and the six others were converted: they were influenced by Ratna, they began to study about Islam on their own and then they began to go to the mosque to pray. I began to wonder if Ratna’s name was being mentioned simply because he is now out of the country and therefore out of reach of the Nepalese government.

I once asked Basanta how his brother Ratna became so transformed by Islam. He simply said that Ratna had come across some books on Islam and it was the message of Islam that transformed him. However, I have reason to believe that there was another person, Yaqub, who was instrumental to their conversion process, but whom Basanta did not name for fear that Yaqub might be arrested. One or two in the Muslim community who were not so guarded in their opinions had credited the conversion of the seven men to Yaqub. When I asked Yaqub if he had indeed converted them, he replied that conversion is a personal matter, but admitted that he did proselytize to ‘a lot of Hindus’ and that some of them may have been convinced about Islam. I also asked Basanta if Yaqub had taught him about Islam, to which he answered, “No.” Yaqub is quite well-known in the locality and I have seen Basanta at his house a few times, but I can only speculate as to the precise nature of their relationship.

Although he was initially influenced by his brother to convert to Islam, his faith and adherence to Islam have outgrown his admiration for his brother, whom he observed is no longer interested in “the spiritual”. In one of his e-mails Basanta wrote, “I was very religious even when I was in my teens. I used to go to Swayambhu temple every morning. I am still very religious but in a different religion which is much wider and universal. I think the main cause of my conversion to Islam is something to do basically with my former religion. This sounds absurd but it’s true. When I was a small child, I used to carry a pocket-knife. When my father found out, he forbade me to carry it. He used to tell me Buddhists should not be carrying even a needle as a weapon let alone a pocket knife.” The fact that Basanta sees a link between his strict adherence to Islam and his strict upbringing as a Buddhist implies that he recognizes a pattern in his piety. While his religion and his outlook on life may have changed, he is still the same in terms of his faithful performance of his religious duties. He believes that the daily prayer is central to Muslim identity, and looks down on Muslims who do not perform their daily prayers, calling them “so-called” Muslims in one of his e-mails. The story about his father not allowing him to carry even a pocket knife shows that from an early age, he was taught to observe the principles of his religion strictly. However, when we compare this to the earlier episode where his father asked him to fetch cow-dung to purify the prayer room, we can see a marked difference in his attitude towards the past. He seems to have totally abandoned Buddhist ideas about purity and pollution, finding his past actions (and those of his father) to be totally incomprehensible from the vantage point of his Muslim present. This reinterpretation of the past, known as ‘biographical reconstruction’ (Snow and Machalek, 1983), is a key feature in the narrative of religious converts. It serves as a tool for the convert to show the difference between his past and present selves (regardless of what he might have actually thought or believed at that time).

Case 2: Jamal

When he learnt that I wanted to meet Muslim converts, Imran, my informant, suggested that I meet his brother-in-law, Jamal. “He was a Hindu. His

father used to be a *purohit*¹⁸ at Pashupatinath¹⁹. Jamal was so strict that he would walk to Pashupatinath barefoot every day. Then he fell in love with my sister and the two of them ran away to India. I managed to find them, and I gave him two choices. Convert to Islam and marry my sister, or stay in his religion and leave her. But if he wants to marry my sister without converting to Islam, if he ever visits my house, I will not be responsible for his life,” said Imran, as he laughed at the hilarity of his threat. Then, with pride in his voice, he said, “After that, he converted to Islam and now he is a pukka Muslim.”

Near the end of my fieldwork, I managed to get an appointment to see Jamal. It was early in the afternoon, and I found him in his third floor flat, reading on the floor and surrounded by stacks of books and loose pieces of paper. I smiled at the irony that after all the months of staying in Kathmandu, I only managed to get this one appointment, when in reality, he and I have seen each other at Imran’s house countless times. No one had ever mentioned to me that he was the convert they all talked about, nor did he make any mention of it whenever we had an opportunity to speak to each other at Imran’s house.

The moment he saw me at the door, he got up and invited me inside. In fluent English, he apologized for the mess and explained that his wife, son and daughter-in-law have gone to Nepalgunj to visit his daughter who has just given birth and he simply did not have the time to clean the house. He also apologized that we had not had the chance to talk before, as he was often out of Kathmandu on business. I explained that the reason for my visit is to interview him about his conversion experience. He agreed to the interview but refused to be recorded on tape. So what follows is based on the transcript of the interview which I scribbled in my journal as he spoke.

“I was a Brahmin from Maharashtra. In my neighbourhood, there were about 200 Brahmin families and no one knew anything about Islam. All I knew was that the Brahmins were landlords and Muslims were the ones who tilled the land. I knew that I should not touch Muslims. Muslims are also not allowed to enter the house. They are given separate glasses and utensils. The Brahmins also

¹⁸ Hindu priest

¹⁹ The main Hindu temple in Kathmandu

do not eat anything cooked by the Muslims. In fact, my uncle was a *jagat raj guru shankaracharya*.”²⁰

“I first came from India to Nepal more than 30 years ago as a tourist. But I eventually ran out of money and I found a job in Kathmandu as a salesman. During that time, I stayed in front of Imran’s house. And then I fell in love with Imran’s sister. As Nepal is a Hindu country, inter-religious marriages are not allowed and we had to run away to India. It was sudden –we talked it over only once, and then we ran away. I told her not to declare she is a Muslim. I told her to keep a Hindu name and stay close to me. But it was difficult for us to live in India and after nine months, we returned to Kathmandu.

“The moment we returned, my wife was abducted by Imran and hidden from me. I went to Imran, who said that if I wanted my wife back, I should convert to Islam and marry her. But I replied, ‘Keep her. I will learn [Islam] and if I agree, I will come back for her. Let me learn if I can become a Muslim.’ They said that all I had to do was to leave this [Hindu] religion and say the *kalimah shahadat* and I will be a Muslim. But if I do this, what is the meaning? I spoke with *maulanas*²¹ but they don’t know about Islam, except that Islam is a great religion. After 15 days, I realized that I could not live without my wife, so I had to convert to Islam to be with her. However, Muslims in Kathmandu do not know much about Islam, so I went again to India, this time to learn about becoming a Muslim.”

“Muslims are living as a brotherhood and everywhere in India, I was welcomed by the Muslim communities when I told them I wanted to learn about Islam. The first lesson I learnt was that there are no categories in Islam. Poor people were talking and shaking my hands. I ate with everyone. What is the difference between Ishwar and Allah? I promised myself that I will find out. But I am a believer in God. I believe in God. There is no paper, no agreement. If I learn about Islam and I like [what I learn], then I will be a Muslim, or else I will stay in my religion. I am only to convert because of my wife. For twenty-six years I have been saying ‘Ram Ram.’ Can I suddenly say ‘Allah’? From the day I became a

²⁰ A title for an important Hindu religious leader; there are only four in India.

²¹ Muslim religious leaders

Muslim, I never said 'Ram' again. I know Sanskrit, I did four to five years of Brahmin priest work, but when I became a Muslim, I stopped everything. It is kismet from Allah."

"I never ate meat or eggs as a Brahmin. I didn't drink. But when I came to Islam, I became a drinker. In religion the Muslims may be strict, but I drank because my friends were drinkers. First it was beer, then it was whiskey. I became habituated. My wife at first didn't know that I drank. No one knew. After 1 year, two years, my wife found out, and she didn't allow me to drink, or else she will divorce me. By that time, I had a son and a daughter, and I was staying in Nepalgunj. A friend of mine, a Hindu who was a heavy drinker, called me to his home. He said, "The Muslim community doesn't allow drinking. If you love your wife, stop drinking. If you don't then leave your wife." So I stopped drinking. I listened to the drinker. I took an oath to Allah to stop drinking, and put both my hands on my children's heads when I took that oath. I swore upon my children."

"Once I had a business client who was ready to sign a major contract. He said, "Before I sign this, let's have a drink together." I said that I do not drink, and he threatened not to sign the contract if I did not drink. I was determined and refused to drink, and I said, "Here's the contract. If you want, you can sign. If you don't then don't." The next morning, the client called back and said that he was impressed with my behaviour. He is a Brahmin. He should not be drinking. Somehow my determination not to drink made him change his mind. He said that he could trust me as a person. And he signed that contract."

"The difference between Hindus and Muslims is that Muslims follow the Quran and Hadith. Others have many gods, and their religion is more flexible. Islam never said make adjustments. You are Muslim, be a Muslim. Surrounding people will only learn about Islam if you are a Muslim first. We are adjusting because of our stomach. Allah *allowed* me to eat this animal. Allah did not order me to eat it. It is the property of Allah, and therefore you have to say the name of Allah over the animal. As long as the food is *halal* to eat, I eat it. When my Hindu friends give me *prasad*²² I eat it."

²² Food that has been blessed by Hindu priests.

“Religion is pure, like milk. Life is an exam, and we will face the result of our exams after our death. The Prophet also had exams. He was put through trials so that we can learn from him. Muslims don’t know about the Quran. No one in Kathmandu is a real Muslim. Even a person who follows all five rules, the *mulvi* even, doesn’t follow the rules of Islam according to his behaviour. I read the Quran everyday and I pray five times a day.”

Analysis

Like Basanta, Jamal’s conversion narrative does not describe the actual conversion event. Also like Basanta, he placed an emphasis on learning the religion before he converted, although in his case, he does admit that the primary motive for his conversion was to marry his wife. It was just ‘kismet’ that he liked what he learnt and that it enabled him to marry his wife. However, according to Imran’s account, Jamal was forced to convert because Imran had threatened to kill him if he does not convert to Islam. Again, it seemed to have worked out for all parties involved as even Imran admits that Jamal is now a ‘pukka’ Muslim.

However, there are certain elements that are missing from the narrative. Why exactly did Jamal leave for India? Jamal said that although conversion in Nepal would have been easy, it was meaningless as he did not truly believe in it. According to his account, he had gone to India to learn about Islam, portraying himself as a seeker of knowledge and truth, so much so that he was willing to risk losing his wife if he did not find Islam to his liking. There is, however, another reason why he might have left for India. Unlike Basanta who was a Buddhist with Nepalese citizenship, Jamal was a Brahmin from India. As Nepal is a Hindu country, the conversion of a high-caste Hindu might attract the attention of the authorities. Perhaps it was for the sake of Jamal as it was for the Muslim community in Kathmandu that he was sent to India to convert to Islam.

It is also interesting to note that apart from describing the new ideas and values that he learnt in India, he did not mention any of the people he met or places he went to when he was in India. When I asked him exactly where he went, he just answered vaguely, “All over India.” Jamal’s journey to India to learn about Islam is also well-known among his close family and friends. All

those I spoke to also strongly opposed the suggestion that Jamal went to India to convert to Islam, but rather that he went there to “learn about Islam”.

Jamal is not in contact with his family in Maharashtra, although his wife often asks him to introduce her to his family. He says that he does not want to hurt his family as he knows his conversion would not be accepted by them. The severance of family ties has meant that Jamal is able to start anew in Kathmandu. Unlike Basanta, who retains his Buddhist name, Jamal’s Hindu name is not known to anyone except perhaps his wife and her close relatives. He took on the name ‘Jamal Khan’ when he converted and is known to everyone in Kathmandu by that name only.

His narrative ends with his opinion about Muslims in Kathmandu, denouncing them as not being real Muslims, not even the religious leaders. His belief in Islam, on the other hand, is based daily performance of prayers, study and understanding, a sentiment which I suspect may have been carried over from his days as a Brahmin priest when he knew more about Hinduism than a person from any other caste. Nevertheless, his deep belief in Islam and his faithful performance of prayers seem to imply that conversion does not necessarily mean a total transformation of a person’s religious self. While the parameters of the religion may have changed, Jamal’s commitment and adherence to religious ideas and the performance of religious duties seem to remain the same. His convert status does not seem to have an adverse status on his life in the Muslim community. Those who knew him spoke well of him and said that he is a good Muslim. He also arranged marriages of his children with other Muslims from Kathmandu.

Conversion at the fringe: Aisha

One of the interesting features about Muslim society in Kathmandu is that they are almost exclusively made up of born Muslims, while converts to Islam constitute a negligible portion of society. Although the relationship between converts and born Muslims may sometimes be strained by concerns over the legality of religious conversion, socially, there is no barrier to commensality or marriage with converts. Among the twelve converts that I interviewed, five were

married to Muslims, four of whom are established Kashmiri Muslims. Out of the four, two were high-caste Kashmiri women who were given to Muslim converts. I attended one of their weddings, and observed that the full marriage rites were performed, with the groom's side being represented by relatives of the Muslim girl, which indicates that there is no shame attached to marriage with converts, even among the Muslim high castes.

These cases can be compared to the case of Aisha, a nineteen year-old girl from Itahari district in Eastern Nepal. Unlike Jamal and Basanta, Aisha is a new arrival to Kathmandu. When I interviewed her, she had been living in Kathmandu for only 5 months. She and her husband, an odd-job labourer, share a tent on a piece of land adjacent to the Swayambhu cemetery. When I asked her how she came to Kathmandu, she replied:

Six years ago, a Muslim boy came from Jitpur [Western Nepal] to look for work at the *cilli milli* [festival/party decorations] factory where I was working. I fell in love with him. At that time, I was a Chhetri [Hindu] and I was afraid that my parents would forbid the relationship, so I eloped with him. My parents don't know where I went, only that I ran away with a Muslim boy.

I've come here with my husband because my father and mother-in-law are cruel to me. I'm not even allowed to go anywhere – even to my mother's home. They tell me that if I go to my mother's house, I have to cook for myself. If I eat the food my mother has cooked for me, the Muslims will avoid me. I can't even use the pots in my own mother's house. I have to bring my own pots. I was not allowed to eat at restaurants. I was not allowed to speak Nepali with the family. They wanted me to speak their language, Mangta. But I cannot speak it, so it was difficult. I learned by copying what others did.

In order to make her a Muslim, they performed "*mulvi garyo*" (Nepali: to do *mulvi*) at her husband's house. During *mulvi*, they burned incense and candles, and the convert wore new clothes. She has to remain behind a screen and listen to the *mulvi*, who will instruct her on various aspects of being a Muslim and also listen to his read the Quran. After they had performed *mulvi garyo*, she was allowed to cook for them, and the family could eat her food. But they still need to do *mulvi gario* for the others in the village. The *mulvi* (religious leader/teacher) of the village demanded 10,000 rupees to perform *mulvi* for the village. In the past,

it used to be that they would invite 200-300 people, but now the *mulvi* demands money instead, which would then be used for a feast.

Unless this *mulvi* is done, the Muslim convert is still thought of as a Hindu, and she cannot, therefore, touch anything or cook for anyone. If she should touch a Muslim person's food without having done *mulvi* first, that food is *jutho* (polluted). They also have to purify whatever it is that she touches. Also, unless this *mulvi* is done, no Muslim can marry the offspring of the convert and his/her spouse. If a Muslim were to eat food cooked by a Muslim convert who had not done *mulvi*, then others cannot marry the person's offspring either.

I then asked her how she feels about being a Muslim. Aisha likes the idea of saying "Allah" when she wakes up, when she eats, at the end of a meal, before sleeping and cooking. She could not find this in Hinduism, where God is only remembered during ceremonies. She says that she has to remember to say "Allah" and not "Bhagwan" anymore. She also mentioned that her wedding had no music, and was quiet, unlike Hindu weddings that tend to be noisy. In addition, she says that although Muslims may be poor, they can still remember Allah. But she doesn't know how to pray very well. She learned to wear clothes like other Muslim women, i.e. to wrap the sari so as to be able to cover her head.

Aisha's conversion experience is in stark contrast with that of Basanta and Jamal's: it is not only ritualized, but it involved the whole village. Because Aisha and her husband have yet to do the *mulvi* in her husband's village, Aisha is not yet considered a true Muslim. Her ambiguous status extends even beyond the village – when I visited her in Swayambhu, she was cooking alone, while the other Muslim women shared a hearth and were preparing the mid-day meal together. When I asked her why, she replied, "I have not yet done *mulvi*, so they will not share their food with me." I asked her how the other women found out that she had not yet done *mulvi*. "How can I lie?" she asked, "There are some people here who are from my husband's village also. They know the truth, or when they go home, they will find out the truth. So we have to say that we have not done *mulvi*."

The ostentatious, elaborate nature of religious conversion in rural Nepal can be contrasted to the simplified, secret style that is the case in urban

Kathmandu. When I told Basanta and Jamal about Aisha's experiences, they dismissed the need for such rituals and said that they were "social" and not "religious". Basanta laughed at the idea of having to throw a feast to the whole village. "Here in Kathmandu, Muslims don't want to create trouble. They were so afraid when we [converts] first came to the mosque. You want them to throw a feast as well?"

Aisha's case study is also valuable for the way that she expresses her Muslim identity. One of the main markers of Muslim identity she mentioned was the name of God: the Muslim Allah as opposed to Hindu Bhagwan. Although this may seem like a minor issue, in census surveys, the name of the God worshipped is the main determinant of religious identity. Aisha also made the point about the importance of appearing Muslim in the way that she wore her sari. For Aisha, however, canonical prayer is not an important vector of religious identity. Aisha finds that repeating the name "Allah" is more fulfilling to her than the performance of prayer.

Conclusion

The Muslim converts in Nepal provide an interesting case for the study of religious conversion: it shows the extent to which the state is able to control and maintain religious boundaries while at the same time defining the way that religious identity is expressed within those boundaries. The first Muslims who came to Nepal were not missionaries; they were artisans, linguists and traders, invited for their skills which were required by the state. As such, the Hindus in Nepal were not under threat of missionary activity by the Muslims. The Christians, however, were different. The ones who came during the Malla period were Capuchin priests, who had begun to convert some of the local population to Christianity. When Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered the Valley and wanted to rid his newly formed kingdom of external influences, he expelled the Capuchin priests and the local Christian converts, but retained the services of the Muslims.

The fact that the early Muslims were not missionaries, coupled with the ban on conversion and proselytization, have effectively prevented not only the development of a missionary structure (such as the establishment of missionary

schools and hospitals), but also the development of a missionary ethos among the Muslims. For Muslims in Kathmandu, religious conversion in Kathmandu is a taboo subject. The avoidance of the subject has to be understood within the context of their minority status in a Hindu state which was dealt with in Chapter 5, where it is argued that the social insecurity felt by the Muslims has led them to choose markers of religious identity that will not antagonize the Hindu majority. In this case, it is the missionary drive that has been repressed to the point that talking about conversion to Islam is considered taboo.

As a result, the discourse of Muslims on the subject of religious conversion is ambivalent and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, the Muslims complain about their inability to compete with missionaries of other religions and sects and the lack of financial and social support for the converts to Islam. On the other, the case studies have shown that the born Muslims tend keep a distance from such converts, for fear of reprisals from the state. The case studies of Jamal and Basanta show that converts to Islam have also internalized the minority mindset of the Muslims. This is reflected in the way that their conversion narratives downplay the conversion process to draw attention away from the illegality of the process and to prevent those involved in it from prosecution.

The case studies presented also highlight the issue of agency in determining religious identity. As converts, Basanta, Jamal and Aisha are faced with various markers of religious identity, such as language, prayer, food, and physical appearance. Their adoption or rejection of these markers of identity is partly determined by personal preference: Aisha prefers to remember Allah than to pray, Basanta prefers that people call him by his Hindu name than his Muslim one while Jamal insists that people only call him by his Muslims one. This then leads to the question, is there an objective set of markers of identity without which one cannot be called a Muslim? These case studies show that there is. Even though Aisha does not like the idea of praying five times a day, she is well aware of the centrality of prayer to Muslims. Even though Basanta prefers to be called by his Hindu name, he wishes for the day when he can legally change it so that he can apply for a passport and perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. The 'set' of

markers is objective, but it is not a coherent set of ideas. It can be confusing and contradictory as different groups present their own ways of defining what is or is not “Muslim”. For example, prayer is a vector of Muslim identity, but how one should pray, what the position of the hands should be, how many sets one should perform are the “choices” that a Muslim is faced with. Some, like Basanta, make their choices through reading books and consultations with religious scholars. In Jamal’s case, even after consultation with religious scholars, he decides to go against their advice and live by his own interpretation of what is permissible under Islamic law. Then there is Aisha, who is a Muslim by following others, while at the same time, defining her own Muslim identity by selectively appropriating from the given markers her own style of piety.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tablighi Jama'at

This chapter looks at the impact that Nepal's prohibition of religious conversion and proselytization has had on the expression of religious identity.

Introduction

In Chapter Six, the issue of changing identities was discussed with respect to religious conversions from other religions into Islam. This chapter look at one of the most popular and successful missionary movements aimed at reforming Muslim society - the Tablighi Jama'at. The central issue here is still religious conversion, but it is conversion as it occurs within Muslim society: between Muslim sects as well as from one level of religious commitment to another. This thesis also looks at the more subtle signs of conversion, stressing the idea that conversion can be a private, gradual process. As in the previous chapter, the various aspects of the Tablighi Jama'at that are adopted or rejected highlight the importance of context within which the conversion occurs or is attempted.

The Tablighi Jama'at is one of the most popular and enduring of the Muslim reformist movements that have emerged from India. Today, the Tablighi Jama'at operates in more than 80 countries and its annual conference, which draws millions, is the second largest Muslim congregation after the Haj. *Tabligh* -- which means 'conveying' or 'communicating' -- is essentially a missionary movement aimed at reforming nominal Muslims. It was first founded in the 1920's in colonial India by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas,¹ a Muslim scholar from the lineage of the Siddiqui Sheikhs from Jhanjhana and Kandhlah.

In order to understand the ethos of the Tablighi Jama'at, it is necessary to outline some of the issues that characterized religious reform during the colonial

¹ For an in-depth analysis of the Tablighi Jam'at, see Haq (1972) The Faith Movement of Maulana Mohmamad Ilyas and also Ahmad (1991) "Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: The Jama'at Islami and the Tablighi Jama'at" in Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby Fundamentalisms Observed pp. 457-530

period. When the British lifted the ban on proselytization by Christian missionaries in 1813, the Hindus and Muslims responded to the change in similar ways. Each began to define its orthodoxy and eradicate what it considered erroneous religious beliefs and syncretistic social practices within their own societies. The relationship between the Christians, Hindus and Muslims was at times confrontational; in fact, a prominent feature of nineteenth-century life was the inter-religious debates which provided “legitimacy and recognition to a range of actors and values denied place in the imperial order” (Freitag 1989: 6).

The threat to Muslim society, according to the religious reformers, was both internal and external. The reformers were worried that the rise in proselytization by the Christians and Hindus would cause Muslims, most of whom were converts to Islam, to change their religion. However, the threat of conversion was but one facet of a deep crisis of identity that was plaguing the ulama. They were struggling to find the reason for the decline of Muslims in India, from being conquerors and rulers one day and a defeated, powerless minority the next. One of the main reasons, they decided, was that Muslim faith was weak, corrupted by un-Islamic influences which eroded Islamic identity and solidarity. Therefore, they called for a return to scripture and the re-building of Muslim society through religious reform.

The ulama, however, were divided about the nature of religious reform. They competed against each other for the right to define orthodoxy for Muslim society. These were expressed in public debates where the issues debated ranged from everyday matters such as the correct manner to call Muslims to prayer, to political issues such as whether Muslims should migrate to Afghanistan to escape the tyranny of the British. The nineteenth century also saw the advent of print in India, which rapidly became the “necessary weapon in the defence of the faith” (Robinson 1992: 69). In the 1820’s, the ulama began a paper *fatwa* (religious ruling) war, printing tracts to attack their opponents and defend their own religious positions. The Ahl-e Sunnat, for example, had two printing presses which published books and journals to attack rival groups such as the Deobandi

and the Nadwat al-Ulama. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were over seven hundred newspapers and magazines in Urdu (Robinson 1992).

While the advent of print enabled the ulama to express their ideas to a wider public, the concomitant profusion of opinions, judgements and *fatwas* soon damaged the basis of their authority. The traditional transmission of knowledge, from teacher to pupil, was broken by print, which enabled “any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad... [to] make what they willed of them” (Robinson 1992: 75). However, the ulama was not to be easily overthrown by the printed word and the literate lay man. Firstly, the percentage of literate Muslims was low, which meant that the illiterate masses were dependent on the learned religious scholars for guidance. Secondly, the structure of Muslim society -- with the learned men leading the laymen -- was resistant to change. The structure is based on the principle that the ordinary, untrained man (no matter how literate) is not able to distinguish for himself the merits of the esoteric arguments in the texts. The perpetuation of this structure did not only come from the ulamas who had a vested interest in keeping the status quo; laymen were equally keen to define their religious identity by being on the right side of the *fatwa*. The questions that were raised at the public debates, which dealt with quotidian issues such as the correct way to pray and dress, showed that the layman still looked to the ulama for guidance and clarification on religious matters.

At the outset, it should be noted that the Tablighi Jama'at “is not an intellectual movement that encourages speculation and breadth” (Metcalf 1996: 54). Maulana Muhammad Ilyas was convinced that true Islam lay in the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet, and he took steps to ensure their centrality (as opposed to other religious texts that have exploded onto the market) in Muslim life. In the early 1930's, he requested his nephew to write a collection of pamphlets which detailed the merits of the Quran, prayer, fasting and *zikr* (religious chants). These outline the basic tenets of the Tablighi Jama'at, the details of which are presented below. Later, a book on the lives of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad was added, ‘perhaps the single text most read during the course of missionary tours’ (Metcalf 1996: 53) because it

inculcates the values of humility, courage and piety in the participants of the tours.

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas was not blind to the fact that the majority of the population did not have access to learning, religious or otherwise. During his visit to Mewat in north India, he found that the Muslims were almost indistinguishable from the Hindus in terms of their religious practices and appearance. It was then that he realized that religious knowledge was not being transmitted to the masses who were in danger of being assimilated into the Hindu population. In addition, the Hindu Arya Samaj was actively proselytizing in the area, calling for the re-conversion of those who had converted to Islam back into the Hindu fold. The Mewatis, being 'Muslims in name' (Mayaram 1997: 224), were considered soft targets for the Arya Samaj, which prompted Maulana Muhammad Ilyas to devise a more effective method of bringing Islamic teaching to these Muslims.

Unlike other ulama who rely on the written word to spread their ideas, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas used the printed word as a tool to empower literate Muslims to teach others the basic tenets of Islam. However, the texts are not simply for personal edification; they are to be embodied in one's actions, demeanour and appearance. In Maulana Muhammad Ilyas own words: "We have left our homes to reform ourselves, before we reform others" (quoted in Metcalf 1996: 52).

To ensure that all Muslims receive the fundamental teachings of Islam, the Tablighi Jama'at utilizes the concept of *da'wa*, which in Islam is the obligation of every Muslim to guide or invite other Muslims to fulfil their religious duties. The Tablighi Jama'at operates by inviting volunteers to donate some time to *da'wa*:

An active male worker continues his work-a-day and familiar responsibilities, but ideally absents himself for tabligh one night a week, three days a month, forty days a year -- a *chilla*, in a transvaluation of the Sufi term -- and for three continuous chilla, 120 days, once in a lifetime (Metcalf 1994: 709)

Freed from the demands of daily life, a person who goes on a Tablighi tour is able to fully immerse himself in learning more about Islam and practise it within a community of like-minded Muslims. At the same time, he is also an instrument for the transmission of religious knowledge as he performs *da'wa* to other Muslims.

The Tablighi Jama'at in Kathmandu

The history of the Tablighi Jama'at in Kathmandu is recounted by Jaffar, a man who converted to Islam around the time that it started in Kathmandu. The following is an extract from a letter he wrote to me, and the information in parentheses is his. Those in square brackets are my definitions of the Urdu terms he used.

It started in Kathmandu 23 years ago (1978!) with its "Amir" as Mr. Khalil Shah (a former Kashmiri masjid man, who used to live in Baghbazar). A year after that we embraced Islam. Those days these guys were very active. Every now and then, they used to have some kind of programs at the mosque which we used to attend, mostly listening to their *taqrirs* [discourses or sermons]. Every Thursday evening they gather at the mosque immediately after the Assar prayer for their weekly *taqrirs*. After that they go to different houses or shops of Muslims to call them to mosque for prayer and rehash them about Islam. (I like this particular way of pulling people -- who are so-called Muslims -- towards Islam). Due to their effort, we see some more lines (*saf*) during the Maghrib prayer. After that they will have dinner at the mosque. Some of them even sleep at the mosque itself. They do the touring too. They take people to different places like Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and to some cities in Nepal, for one week to nearby places, and for four months to foreign places. Tabliki [sic] people of those countries come to Kathmandu too.

The Tablighi Jama'at in Kathmandu has no headquarters and is not registered with the government as a religious organization. There is however, an Amir (leader) for Kathmandu who leads the weekly meetings at the Nepali mosque, as well as a few active members who help to organize and lead Tablighi tours. The group usually meets after *asr* (late afternoon) and *isya'* (late evening)

prayers on Thursdays at the Nepali Mosque. During this time, they would listen to sermons, share their experiences of the tours, and discuss plans for future ones. New members are also gathered during these meetings. A young man in his twenties described to me, “I had just finished my prayers, and [the Tablighi Jama’at] were there. They said, ‘Who will join our tour?’ and everyone was looking at me. My friends were saying, ‘You should join them, you should join them.’ I could not say no.”

In Kathmandu, most of the young men I interviewed had gone on the Tablighi tour. A 3-day tour begins on Thursdays after *asr* prayers and lasts until Sunday morning. The itinerary of the tour varies, but the short duration usually means that the group will visit neighbouring mosques around the Kathmandu Valley. The Tabligh usually stay at the local mosque. According to Tablighi rule, each man must be self-sufficient, which means that he has to bear his own costs and bring his own bedding, food and clothing. One young man boasted that the group he travelled with had only spent 400 rupees for a whole month. This was possible because of the generosity of the Muslims they met along the way. However, according to Metcalf, this is not exactly the prescribed manner of the Tabligh: “In relation to those they hope to guide, they are, ideally, scrupulous in accepting nothing – not even a cup of tea” (1996: 55).

The mosque is also a rich source of information for the Tabligh’s missionary work, as Hussain, a teacher in his mid forties, explained:

Two or three years ago, a group from Bhopal [India] came to my house. There were about 5 of them: a leader, a mediator (who will introduce the leader) and other members. They were staying at the Nepali mosque. The practice is to obtain information from the mosque about where Muslims live, and then they will go to that area.

Hussain likened the Tablighi method of reaching out to Muslims with the way that I found my informants: through the Muslim network. By asking for information about other Muslims in the area, the Tablighi are involving the local Muslims in their activities. The locals act as guides to the Tablighi or participate

in the dissemination of Tablighi ideas by recommending names and places of Muslims in the area.

A Tablighi Encounter

One day, I was brought me to a house where there was a Tablighi meeting for women. As Tablighi meetings are strictly segregated, my informant, who was male, bade me goodbye at the door and handed me over to an elderly woman. Smiling, the elderly woman gently held my hand and led me up two flights of stairs.

She first brought me to a room full of elderly women all sitting on the floor, drinking tea and listening to a sermon which was broadcast through the speakers placed at the corner of the room. No one spoke. All heads were bowed, listening intently. It appeared as though my guide was looking for someone, and not finding her there, she led me to another room. This time, the room was a flurry of activity. A few young women were busy preparing tea and biscuits, while others, some with young children, sat on the floor. The elderly woman indicated that I sit down, and she left. The women around me smiled and tentatively gave the Muslim greeting, "*Assalamu 'alaikum*" [peace be upon you]. When I replied "*Mu'alaikum salam*", they immediately began to speak to me in Urdu. Using what little Urdu I knew, I replied that I do not speak the language, but even that became a sign of encouragement, and the women, instead of giving up, just spoke slower. I knew that Kathmandu Muslims are often able to speak two, if not three, languages – Hindi, Urdu, Nepali or Newari - and I was hoping that if I tried to speak Nepali, someone would eventually speak in Nepali. But it was to no avail. I would ask questions in Nepali and the replies would almost always be in Urdu.

Just when I was feeling lost, a young Tibetan-looking girl came up to me and began speaking in fluent English. Her name was Halima. The elderly woman, who happened to be her mother, had told her that I do not speak Hindi and asked her to help me. I asked her who had organized this Tablighi meeting. "There are some women from Pakistan who came with their husbands for Tabligh," she

explained, “and they are staying at my house.” That day was their last day. One of the Pakistani ladies came towards us, and instructed Zakiya to translate for her. “She welcomes you to this meeting”, Zakiya translated, “and said that she is very happy that you have come.” Then the Pakistani woman ran off and after a few minutes, she came back with some pieces of paper. She said that she will read something for me, and with the help of Zakiya, she began. The reading was painfully slow, and at first I could not understand a word she said. As we were not making much progress, I asked to look at the paper and realized that it was in Urdu script which I was able to read phonetically. As I began to read, I realized that the Pakistani woman had been trying to speak in English: Urdu script was used to write English words so she was able to read it phonetically although she might not understand what she was reading (just as she would do with the Arabic of the Quran). “She’s trying to read English written in Urdu script!” I said to Halima, and she grabbed the paper to have a look. Halima then asked her where she got the paper from. The Pakistani woman replied that she had brought the script from Pakistan, and was keeping it just in case she met someone like me who could not understand Urdu.

I then asked if I could write down what she was reading, and she looked very pleased. It was very difficult as the pronunciation was garbled, and with the noise coming from the loudspeakers, difficult to hear. As the reading progressed, it became clear that there were some missing pages, but we continued nevertheless. In the end, after an hour of reading and translating, this is a transcript of what emerged:

My dear sister and mother,

Alhamdulillah [praise be to Allah] our religion is Islam, is only refuge offering full peace happiness in this life and the hereafter. But there are some qualities in our *din* if we learn and act upon and we can reach first. Kalimah: *La illaha illallah, Muhammad darrasul lullah* [there is no God except Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet]. It means Allah *subhanallah* [Glory be to Allah] is the reigning God only, is working and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* [May He be Glorified and Exalted]. The purpose of the *kalimah* [proclamation

of faith] is Allah is our carer, our Mentor, he can do everything without the creature, but the creature cannot do anything without Allah. And all the six are in the obedience of our Holy Prophet Muhammad *salallahu alai wassalam* [peace be upon him].

1. The Virtues of the Kalimah. If an unbeliever says this *kalimah*, all his sins will be forgiven. If the seven skies and earth is one part and the *kalimah* is other part, the *kalimah* will be heavier. If a Muslim repeats this *kalimah* 100 times daily, he will be raised from his grave like the moon of the first night. This *kalimah* is the key of Jama'at. This *kalimah* is the price of paradise. This *kalimah* is the route of *Iman* [faith].

2. Namaz [prayer]. It is the duty of every Muslim to pray five times a day. Virtues: *Salat* [prayer] is the pillar of Islam. Salat is the key of paradise. Salat is the best jihad. Salat is the most gracious. The ... salat refreshes the body. There is no place for a person in Islam who does not say his salat and there is no salat without *wuzur* [ablution]. A person in *shishda* (prostrating) is nearest to Allah. The position of salat in Islam is that of the head on the body.

3. Ilm Zikir. In this, the duty of every Muslim to learn the commandments of Allah *subha nahu wata'allah* and the ways of our Prophet Muhammad and to know about *halal* [permitted] and *haram* [forbidden]. Virtues. Whoever learns one word of the Holy Quran is better than a hundred performs *raqaat nafil* [voluntary prayers] and whoever learns one chapter of knowledge of *din* it is better than if he performs one thousand *raqaat nafil*. Travelling in search of knowledge is like jihad. The holy Prophet said that the best of you is who learns Quran and teaches it to others.

4. Ikrami Mudu [respectfulness]. It means that we should respect our elder Muslim brothers and to pay to them their rights. Virtues. When a Muslim greets his brother and says "*Assala mualaikum*", Allah bestows him with 10 *rahmat* (blessings) and when he says "*Wa'alaikum salam*" Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* gives him 30 *rahmat* (blessings). Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* blesses his servants so long he helps his brother Muslim. Whoever conceals the sins of a Muslim, Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* will conceal his sins. In this life and in hereafter, whoever removes suffering of all *mu'min* [believers] in this

life, Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* will save him from the [missing word] of day of judgement.

5. Ikhlas Niat [sincere intention]. It means that we have to do every good deed only for the sake of Allah and not for any other person. Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* accept only those deeds of his servants which are best and complete. Even a small good deed based in sincerity will greatly rewarded by Allah *subhanahu wata'ala*. Whereas insincerity will fetch no reward in this world nor in the hereafter. The Holy Prophet says that Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* does not look towards your faces or towards your riches. But he says these sincerity of your hearts and the.... (pages missing)

6. Dawate Tabligh [Invitation to Tabligh] It means we should invite people to goodness and guide them to the right path and forbid them from committing sins. Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* says “*Intah simillah yar surukum*”. Oh believer, if you help Allah then He will help you and says “*Kuntu khairul ma akinsul linaz*”. Oh Muslim, you are the best of Umma, people who have been selected for the guidance of mankind. You inform them to do good deeds and persuade them from the forbidden things and you have firm faith in Allah. The Holy Prophet *salallahu alai wassalam* says “Each one of you are guardian and you will be cautioned about those under his control.” Says to send one morning and evening in the path of Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* is better [than] this all this world and what it contains.

So my dear sister and mother, it is our fate that the wise Prophet Muhammad *salallahu alai wassalam*. No Prophet will come after him and we and you and every Muslim is responsible for the work and mission of our Prophet *salallahu alai wassalam*. We should go in the path of Allah *subhanahu wata'ala* for sometime to learn about being and preaching to others.

It took two hours to finish, by which time it seemed as though the whole room had been engaged in the process of delivering the message on those pieces of paper message to me. The women took turns to read to me in between listening to the sermon, tea breaks and prayer breaks. When we finally got to the last page, the Pakistani woman gave me a little hug and said “*Alhamdulillah!*” (Praise be to

Allah!) which was echoed around the room with smiles and, I suspect, relief that despite linguistic barriers, the message of Tabligh has finally been conveyed.

The text which was read to me is the core of the Tablighi message, the six basic points or *che baten* (Metcalf 1994: 708). It is the introductory text that most often recited to those whom the Tablighi Jama'at encounter during their missionary tours. In the early 1930's a series of pamphlets were written at the behest of Maulana Ilyas by his nephew, Maulana Muhammad Exochoria Kandhalawi (1898-1982). According to Metcalf, "the pamphlets are... entitled the merits (*faza'il*) of the Qur'an, of prayer, of fasting, of repetition of pious formulae (*zikr*)..." (1996: 53). It is likely that the text that was read to me was an English/Urdu script translation of the pamphlets.

Although it is well known that these texts have been translated to other languages such as Urdu, French and English, what the above encounter shows is that the translation is not simply from one language to another – it is a double translation in terms of content and form. In this case, the translation is from Urdu to English in content and then the English words are painstakingly written in Urdu script so as to facilitate the recitation of the text for the missionary. This shows how language is not a barrier for the Tablighi Jama'at – with the right preparation, any literate member can deliver the message. Therefore, it is not surprising that one would find the Tablighi Jama'at in places as far away from India as Africa and America.

The first two points of the *che baten* are the two 'pillars' of the five fundamental ritual observances in Islam. That these two are included in the six basic points, instead of the other three, is indicative of the importance of the *kalimah* and the *namaz* as vectors of Islamic identity. Of these two, the *namaz* is the ritual par excellence – in fact, the wording of the text is strongest when describing the *namaz* -- "there is no place for a person in Islam who does not say his *salat*" -- the only exclusionary clause in the text. The emphasis on performance in the ethos of the Tablighi Jama'at is linked to their belief that

knowledge in Islam is not an intellectual exercise -- it is to be expressed in action. Being a Muslim is what one does, not merely what one believes or professes.

The third point stresses the importance of knowledge (*‘ilm*). It is interesting how physical devotion takes second place to intellectual learning in the text: “Whoever learns word of the Holy Quran is better than a hundred performs *raqaat nafil*...”. However, the learning that is enjoined upon Muslims is not an individual pursuit for the final point states: “.... the best of you is who learns Quran and teaches it to others.” Meetings of the Tablighi Jama’at often centre around the recitation and exegesis of the Quran and other established texts. It should also be noted that “... *‘ilm* in this context does not define unbounded intellectual pursuits, but instruction and examples meant to be enacted” (Metcalf 1994: 708). *Zikir*, which is also included in the third point, is the repetition of holy words and phrases, which is the verbal aspect of *‘ilm*. At the Tabligh meeting, a number of women were holding prayer beads, their lips moving silently as they performed a *zikir*.

While the first three points deal with the individual’s obligation towards God, the fourth, fifth, and sixth points deals with inter-relations between Muslims. *Ikrami Mudu* emphasizes mutual respect and co-operation, *Ikhlasī Niat*, sincerity, while the final point, *Dawate Tabligh* encourages Muslims to guide others onto the right path. *Ikrami Mudu*, the idea that one should conceal another’s sins shows the concern of the Tabligh for the salvation, rather than the condemnation, of Muslims. It should be remembered that the Tabligh was conceptualized at a time of religious competition, when Hindu and Christian missionaries were actively proselytizing for the souls of Muslims. By being positive-minded, by concealing that which is sinful, the Tablighi Jama’at are less likely to face antagonism from the Muslims they meet. The fifth point, *Ikhlasī Niat* (sincere intention) introduces a more holistic approach to piety, for not only is the outward action important, so is the intention which compels the act. That all acts should be for God shows the direct relationship between man and God, an issue that is of great significance, and will be dealt with in a later section. Having laid out the components of Islamic identity in the first four points, the final point

drives home the Tablighi Jama'at ethos: Muslims have been made 'guardians' of each other, and as such, should persuade each other to do good deeds and abstain from that which is forbidden.

My first and only Tablighi meeting left a deep impression on my mind. The warm welcome that greeted me, the concerted effort by the women to relay the message of Tablighi and the hugs at the door when I departed made me feel as though I was a part of an exclusive sisterhood. The dynamics of group behaviour at the meeting made it hard to be aloof at the meeting: everything was a communal activity. When the time came for prayer, the women would invite those sitting next to them to pray together. When chanting verses from the Quran, the women would adjust each other's *dupatta* (long rectangular cloth) so that it modestly covers the head. No one was made to feel left out or neglected.

My appearance at the Tablighi meeting was to have some significant consequences for my identity as a Muslim in Kathmandu. Among the Muslims who advocated the Tablighi Jama'at, it erased any doubt as to my faith in Islam. After the meeting, my Muslim informants would introduce me as "the one who did Tabligh" and I would get nods of approval and admiration. It was a label that placed me firmly on the Deobandi side of the religious fence. I also learnt that I was being judged differently than I was before, as the following episode will show.

To celebrate Bakrid (the festival of sacrifice), Saleem, my Nepali Muslim informant, invited me to a picnic at the King Tribhuvan Memorial Park. It was a grand occasion – more than 80 of his relatives turned up and everyone was dressed up to the nines. I felt grossly underdressed in a plain shirt and pants and no make-up, sitting next to all the beautifully made-up women in their colourful, sparkling saris and *salwar kurtas*. During lunch, Saleem called me over and said, pointing to his female relatives, "Look at these women. Wearing this [he mimed brushing make-up on his face] and this [painting on nail-polish]. It is no good. You've been to Tablighi and you are dressed simply, no make-up, nothing. You should teach them a few things. These women..." He ended with a sad shake of the head.

It did not matter that I had always dressed plainly and never worn make-up during my stay in Kathmandu. No one noticed these aspects about me until after I had gone for the Tablighi Jama'at meeting. Then suddenly, my plain appearance was interpreted as a sign of piety and strict adherence to Tablighi teachings. Saleem was pleased with my plain appearance. His wife, Zainab, however, was not. Before the picnic, she had tried in vain to put some lipstick on me "So that you will look nice in pictures!" she pleaded. When she heard her husband asking me to preach to the women at the picnic, she smiled, rolled her eyes and shook her head. Zainab is no stranger to Tablighi: she often helps to arrange meetings for women and is a frequent participant. At the same time, she believes that a woman should dress well and look her best.

There are many layers of resistance to the Tablighi Jama'at, some more obvious than others. Similarly, there are also many layers of acceptance and assimilation of Tablighi teachings. At one end of the spectrum, there are those like Zainab who select various aspects of Tablighi teachings that are relevant to their beliefs and lifestyles. At the other end, there are those who are violently opposed to Tablighi teachings like the Muslims who are affiliated with the Kashmiri mosque, who have banned the Tablighi Jama'at from preaching in their mosque.

Local Perspectives of the Tablighi Jama'at: Challenges and Responses

Masood is a middle-aged businessman who converted to Islam at the age of 24. On the day that I visited him, by coincidence, a man came to the door, wearing a turban and a loose *salwar kameez*. After exchanging greetings, Masood had a brief chat with him at the door and then returned to the living room where we were having our interview. He said in English:

That was the Tabligh, do you know them? The Tabligh taught me, came to my house. These are the Tablighi group. But they think they are a superior group to other people. This is not the intention of the founder of Tablighi. These [Tablighi] people believe that the Quran cannot be understood [by ordinary people], even its translations. They think that we can only learn the Quran in Urdu or Arabic or from

Mulvis or Maulanas. It is an outmoded method of teaching. They say you have to go for a 40-day tour. Who will take care of the family? This is not the way for people in the city – the economic condition doesn't allow for people to go away for 40 days at a time. People can't afford it.

Masood highlighted an interesting urban dimension to the Tablighi movement: unlike agricultural work in rural areas, employment in the city is not seasonal. Another Muslim man complained, "I basically work the whole year round. Where can I get 40 days leave at one time?" Masood was also worried about the well-being of his children if he goes away on a tour, especially since he does not have any relatives in the city. "It is different in the countryside – families live near to each other, and if the husband leaves the house, his family can help to take care of his wife and children," said Masood.

Although women are not expected to participate in the tours, some are known to arrange weekly meetings where they learn and discuss the Tablighi texts. However, as in the case of the menfolk, there is also an urban dimension to this. Laila, a housewife in her late thirties, does not have any family members in the city – she and her husband moved to Kathmandu from Siraha when they were newlyweds. Her husband is a retired teacher, who spends most of his time at the mosque, while she stays at home with her four children. She tries to attend the Tablighi meetings, but it is not easy because there is no one to tend to the housework and children when she is away. Whenever she attends a Tablighi meeting, she has to ask her neighbours to serve lunch to her children and arrange for her daughter to cook dinner for the family so that she does not have to rush home after the meeting. Zahara, a housewife in her forties, was more vocal in her criticism of the Tablighi Jama'at. When I asked her if she attends the meetings of the Tablighi Jama'at, she shook her head and said angrily, "These people want you to abandon your duties and just pray. How can you do that? I am a housewife. It is my duty to serve my husband and take care of the house. I do my prayers at home. I don't have time for the Tablighi Jama'at."

These reasons reflect a few issues that are central to urban Muslims. The comparisons between the countryside and the city hint that some of these Muslims may be recent immigrants who are still adjusting to urban life. Not only is the nature of work different, year-round rather than seasonal, but also the work environment, where there is intense competition for jobs. This is especially so in the case of Nepal, where unemployment is high. Masood, who is working as a salesman for a pharmaceutical company, did not want to jeopardize his job by taking a long break. "When I come back, they might give the job to someone else!" he said.

However, the use of country-versus-urban stereotypes seems to be a convenient excuse than an explanation for their non-involvement in the Tablighi Jama'at. This is especially so when we consider the fact that the Tablighi Jama'at is flourishing in urban cities such as Toronto and Los Angeles, where the movement has attracted people from diverse backgrounds, such as government servants, academics, rural workers and traders (Metcalf 1994: 707). This suggests that resistance to the Tablighi Jama'at in Kathmandu is not simply about the lack of time. It is a function of the economic environment where there is high unemployment and little job security; it is about the adjustment of rural immigrants to an urban context where work is not seasonal and where there is little or no family support for those who want to attend.

Tablighi and Literacy

Salman, a man in his early twenties, questioned the need for Tablighi when there are so many books on religion that are available. "The Tablighi is for illiterate people, for whom there may not be any chance to learn about Islam," he said. Salman is a college graduate who participated in the 40-day tour. It was a trying time for him as he found it hard to get along with the members of the Tablighi Jama'at, whom he felt were uncompromising in their application of the Prophet's traditions. An avid reader of books about Islam, Salman felt that the members of the Tablighi had no right to tell him how things should be

interpreted. In fact, things got so bad during the tour that Salman left the group even before the forty days were over.

Access to Islamic literature is another issue that was raised by Salman. In Kathmandu, there is a small Islamic library which is the venue of weekly meetings, lectures and discussions. It is there that Salman obtains books written by other Islamic scholars such as Maulana Abu Ala Maududi (1903-1979), the founder of another reformist group, the Jama'at-i Islami. Salman was impressed with Maududi's ideas for an Islamic government and often compared it to the Tablighi Jama'at's attempts at personal reform: "Maududi really saw the whole picture, you know. Not like these Tablighi, fighting over all the small things, like growing a beard and washing your face in a certain way."

The language barrier which was overcome by clever innovation of the Tablighi Jama'at belies its almost puritanical emphasis on Urdu and Arabic as the lingua franca of its members.² Masood, who is literate and speaks fluently in four languages found it restrictive to only speak in Urdu when he is with people from the Tablighi, or to "only learn the Quran in Urdu or Arabic" as he mentions in the above extract. Language is an important vector of identity for the Tablighi Jama'at. However, this is very much a South-Asian phenomenon, given the fact that the Tablighi Jama'at is also active in countries such as the UK and Singapore, where Urdu is not the spoken language. In Nepal, speaking the language of the Hindu majority, i.e. Nepali, is interpreted as a symbol of identifying oneself with the Hindus. The use of Urdu to set the Muslim community apart from the non-Muslims was also documented by Mayaram (1997) in her study of the effects of the Tablighi Jam'at on the Meos of Mewat. In Mewat, "[d]u'a [prayer] it is asserted, must be said in Urdu to counter the influence of Christianity" (Mayaram 1997: 245).

² This would explain why no one would speak to me in Nepali during the Tablighi meeting I attended.

The Tablighi Jama'at and the Kashmiri Muslims

In July 1999, a fight broke out at the Kashmiri mosque, which resulted in one man being hospitalized and another arrested for allegedly causing bodily harm. At the time that it happened, I was having an interview with Hussain, a part-time lecturer at the local university. His friend had rung him with the news and Hussain then relayed it to me. According to Hussain, the fight was between the members of a Kashmiri family, some of whom had converted to the Deobandi sect. The converted members had allegedly gone to the Kashmiri mosque to do Tabligh, but were stopped by the Kashmiri Muslims. "Somebody said some careless words, and then suddenly they started to fight," he said.

The story that Hussain relayed to me was the accepted version that made its way around the Muslim circles that summer. The antagonism between the Kashmiri Muslims and the Tablighi Jama'at was taken as a given, as the most obvious cause of conflict between Muslims. In this section, I shall look at the issues that divide the Kashmiri Muslims and the Tablighi Jama'at and the reasons behind the Kashmiri resistance to Tablighi ideas.

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, the founder of the Tablighi Jama'at, was, by training and spiritual initiation, linked to the reformers of Deoband, and the movement that he found embodied the Deobandi ethos of reforming Muslim society from within. The Deobandi reformers blamed the moral decay of the Muslims on what they saw as un-Islamic cultural accretions in Muslim society, and they believed that the way to rebuild Islamic society was by embarking on various programs of educational and political reform. In their attempts to reform Muslim society, the Deobandi reformers were challenging the beliefs and values which were already deeply embedded in the religious and social structures of Muslim society. One of the issues which was hotly debated then, and which continues to divide Muslims today, is saint veneration.

In Kathmandu, Muslims who believe in saint veneration affiliate themselves with the Kashmiri mosque. The mosque has a strong tradition of saint veneration, as manifested by the shrines of two saints that are located within its

premises. In India, those who venerate saints are commonly referred to as Barelwi or Ahl-e Sunnat, after the Islamic sect of the same name. However, in Kathmandu, although these terms are familiar to most Muslims, they are not commonly used. Instead, they prefer to use the term “Kashmiri Muslim,” referring not so much to Muslims who hail from Kashmir but rather the name of the mosque where saint veneration is practised. This suggests that local vectors of religious identity take precedence over established sectarian categories (as discussed in Chapter 1). The Kashmiri Muslims are defined, above all, by history. The Kashmiri Muslims take great pride in the fact that they are the descendants of the first Muslim inhabitants in Nepal. The practice of saint veneration, which is handed down from generation to generation, is also a reflection of their attachment to history and genealogy. In Kathmandu, there are two main saints’ shrines located in the Kashmiri mosque, and there are some Kashmiri Muslims who claim to be the descendants of the saints. Other Kashmiri Muslims are affiliated with saints’ shrines in India, such as the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti.

One of the factors that divides the Kashmiris and the Nepalis is the issue of the mediators between a man and God. Included within the category of mediators are the saints and prophets, the example par excellence being the Prophet Muhammad. While Kashmiris and the Nepalis both agree that the Prophet is God’s messenger, the Kashmiris regard him as an extraordinary figure who is a constant presence in their lives and has strong intercessionary powers.

Akbar, a 56 year-old Kashmiri Muslim offered this explanation:

The main difference between the Deobandi and our sect is the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad. We do not believe that he is an ordinary man. Actually, when you look at the history of Islam, this big split came after the Crusades. To split the Islamic community in Saudi Arabia, the Christian missionaries had supported the takeover of power from the Hashimi Sadats. Because the Hashimi Sadats are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, the usurpers began to denigrate the Prophet Muhammad to legitimize the takeover. They put forward the idea that although the Prophet is chosen by God, he is an ordinary man. But here is the contradiction. We are criticized for standing up when giving

salaam to the Prophet during prayer. Yet when the Saudi King arrives, people stand up to greet him. Now who is the greater of the two? The issue of the Prophet is not religious, but rather part of a political strategy to forestall the reclaim of power by the descendants of the Prophet.

Akbar is an avid reader of history, which explains some of the historical references he made in the above extract. While most Kashmiri Muslims are not able to give such a detailed historical account, the issues that they raise in trying to explain the division in Muslim society are the same. Firstly, there is the notion that the changes are caused by external forces. In Akbar's case, it was the Christian missionaries who supported the usurpers in their take-over, presumably with the intention of causing conflict and division in Muslim society. In my other interviews with Kashmiri Muslims, their accounts of the emergence of the Tablighi Jama'at also draws on similar ideas of external forces seeking to disrupt the traditional order of society. Oppositions are drawn between the 'traditional' (read Kashmiri) and the 'new' (Nepali/Deobandi) and the 'internal' (within Kathmandu) and 'external' (outside Kathmandu).

Akbar's account also highlights the issue of religious authority and political power in Islam. Both were embodied by the Hashimi Sadats, who were the descendants of the Prophet as well as the holders of political power. However, according to Akbar, authority and power were separated when the usurpers took over. A retired politician, Akbar was worried that the spread of intolerant ideas would divide the Muslim population. In bringing up the illegality of the take-over, Akbar was indirectly making a case for his own status as a descendant of the Prophet.

What emerges is a power struggle in modern Kathmandu between the Kashmiris and the Nepalis for religious authority, with the argument framed in history and the Prophet as its centrepiece. The tension between the Kashmiris and the Nepalis on the issue of the Prophet is most evident on the Prophet's death and birth anniversary. The Kashmiri mosque is beautifully decorated for the event and special prayers are offered. The Kashmiri Muslims themselves take turns to host

feasts at their homes to observe the event. In contrast, the Nepali mosque, which is affiliated with the Deobandi sect is strikingly unadorned, and special prayers, which are also offered, performed without much fuss. As one Nepali Muslim said of the event, “We are not like the other side [the Kashmiris]. We pray, we remember the Prophet and we read the Quran. That is all.”

However, the role of the Prophet and the legitimacy of power are not the only issues that divide Kashmiri and Nepali Muslims. Linked to this is the idea of intermediaries between man and God. Here we are not only looking at the legal succession of power, but at the entire hierarchy of power as determined by purity and sanctity. Kashmiris believe that prophets and other spiritually eminent persons inhabit their graves in a state of perfect physical preservation and thus their tombs are places worthy of the greatest respect. Also the *baraka* (grace) of such persons was strongest at certain times, such as the celebration of birth or death anniversaries (*urs*). However, the Deobandis are well-known for their opposition to practices such as prostration at saints’ tombs and pilgrimages to shrines because they believe that it approximates to polytheism and violates the doctrine of *tauhid*, the indivisible unity of Godhead (Mayaram 1997: 233). A Kashmiri man offers his explanation for their belief in mediators:

Some people put it simply that we pray to tombs. Actually, we believe that we need mediators between ourselves and God. Let me give you an example. For you to meet me today, you had to go through my nephew. He is your mediator in this case. Likewise in our relationship with God. We believe that we are not able to speak directly with God. We do it through others, those who have shown by their actions that they are close to God. But we believe that ultimately it is God who will answer our prayers, we do not claim otherwise.

If there is one thing that emerges from the above excerpts and explanations, it is that the Kashmiris are on the defensive with regards to their religious beliefs and practices. The Deobandi rejection of saint worship shakes the very foundation upon which their Kashmiri identity is built.

For this reason, although Muslims are allowed to pray in any of the mosques in Kathmandu, it is well known that the Tablighi Jama'at are not allowed to preach in the Kashmiri mosque. One of the senior members of the Kashmiri mosque explained rather diplomatically, "Their ways are different from ours. We do not disturb the way they practice Islam, so they should not disturb ours."

The effect of the Tablighi Jama'at for the Kashmiri Muslims was explained to me in this cautionary tale told to me by a Kashmiri man:

There was once a big family that stayed in Wotu. They were the descendants of Haji Mehtab, a Sufi faith healer who came during the time of Prithvi Narayan Shah. A few years ago, the family split into five different households and they moved away from Wotu. Although separated, the members would gather once a year to observe the *urs* of Abdul Qadir Jilani³, the first Sufi whose tomb is in Baghdad, Iraq. Each household would take turns to host the *urs*. Then one day, the head of one of those household became a Deobandi. Some say that he was influenced by the Tablighi, some say that his Nepali friends influenced him. I don't know for sure. But this brother suddenly decided that he was not going to participate in the *urs* anymore because he believed that it is not Islamic. So when it came to his turn to host the *urs*, there was a big problem. His brothers threatened that they will not to bury him in the Kashmiri side of the graveyard. Therefore, the Deobandi brother found himself torn between his religious duties and family obligations. Before he became Deobandi, his family and his religion were one and the same thing. Now it is separate. In the end, he managed to placate the two sides by hosting the *urs* at his house and providing food for the feast, but he himself did not attend it. But I respect him. At least he gave some respect to his family's traditions.

The teachings of the Tablighi Jama'at, therefore, not only affect the religious practices of the Kashmiri Muslims but also their unity as a group. If there were divisions between the Kashmiri and Nepali Muslims before the arrival of

³ Abdul Qadir Jilani (1078-1166) is a Hanbali theologian who founded the Qadiriyyah Sufi order in Baghdad.

Tablighi Jama'at in Kathmandu, they are being further deepened by the proselytizing efforts of the Tablighi Jama'at which is converting the Kashmiris into Deobandis. The above extract also exposes an interesting aspect about Kashmiri identity: birthright is not immutable, it is dependent on religious affiliation and participation in rituals that define Kashmiri identity.

The above extract also touched upon the issue of respect. It was the one redeeming quality that the Deobandi convert showed to his family, having once regarded their practices 'un-Islamic.'

The notion of respect was echoed by another Kashmiri man:

Kashmiris have a lot of respect for their elders. For example, in my elder brother's presence, I do not speak unless I am spoken to. It is the same with my sons. If they are with me, they will not speak unless spoken to. The way that we pray, our culture and tradition are what our parents have taught us. And what we are doing today, is out of respect for our elders and we are just carrying on the practices of our forefathers. On the other hand, what is taught at the Nepali mosque is new. They do not respect tradition – they want to break away from it.

For most Kashmiri Muslims, tradition is synonymous with respect and hierarchy, the key vectors of Kashmiri identity. Saint veneration, whether it is performed at the *urs* or the daily visits to their tombs, is the ritual par excellence which brings together all the aspects of Kashmiri identity. The Kashmiri Muslims believe that they are a part of a religious hierarchy, at the apex of which is Allah, followed by the Prophet Muhammad and the other holy prophets and saints. The saints act as mediators between man and Allah, expediting the prayers so that it may be favourably received. The Tablighi Jama'at, by inviting Muslims to stop participating in *urs*, stop their pilgrimages to the graves of saints and to pray directly to Allah, is challenging the very structure of Kashmiri religious life.

What is never mentioned by the Kashmiri Muslims is the fact that the founder of the Tablighi Jama'at movement in Kathmandu is rumoured to have been a member of the Kashmiri mosque. A Kashmiri woman once told me a story about a man from the Kashmiri mosque who had gone for Haj some years ago.

“When he was there, he chanced upon a book, which taught him many ideas which were contrary to the beliefs of Kashmiris. One of these ideas was that one should not worship saints. When the man came back to Nepal, he began to preach to the Muslims in the Kashmir mosque. There was a big furore about the matter, and he was eventually asked to leave the mosque.”

Case Study. Internal Conversions: Crossing Over from Kashmiri to Nepali

One day, out of the blue, one of my informants called me on the phone and said “You were asking about the Tablighi Jama’at, right? You should meet my friend, Rehmat. He will be interesting for you.” An appointment was arranged for me to meet Rehmat at a bakery in Durbar Marg, a trendy hangout for rich Nepali youths and expatriates. While I was sitting in the bakery, a handsome young man entered, dressed in designer clothes and Ray-bans perched on the top of his fair, clean-shaven face. “Model, *hola* [maybe],” the girl at the table next to me whispered to her friend. To her amazement, the young man made a bee-line towards us, and stopping at my table, introduced himself as Rehmat. By this time the girls at the next table were giggling uncontrollably. Ignoring them, Rehmat asked me how he could help me in my research and so our interview began. He spoke confidently in fluent English, having been in the best boarding schools in Darjeeling.

Researcher: Tell me about your family.

Rehmat: Actually, I have a mixed parentage. My paternal grandfather was a Nepali Muslim who married a Chinese Muslim. They had only one son, my father. He married my mother, who is one hundred percent Kashmiri. Her family is a very traditional Kashmiri family – they sell those beads in Indrachowk. So they had three children – myself and my two sisters.

Researcher: Which mosque do you go to?

Rehmat: I can go to either mosque. My mother’s side is Kashmiri, and my cousins and friends go to the Kashmiri mosque. I

also used to go there, but since I went for Tabligh, I have become more to the Nepali side.

Researcher: How did you come to join the Tablighi Jama'at?

Rehmat: I have friends from both mosques. The friends from the Nepali mosque kept pestering me to go for Tabligh. Once, twice, I just ignored it. I didn't have the time to go. I didn't feel like going. But one day, after they pestered me, somehow I agreed, and we went for the forty-day tour.

Researcher: How many of you went, and where did you go?

Rehmat: There were eight of us. We were all in our twenties. Only our leader was older, he was in his thirties, I think. We went to many places: Delhi, Pakistan... When I was in Delhi, I saw for the first time the big meeting of Tablighi Jama'at. There were more than 10 *crore* [one million] people. When I saw all those people, I learnt what is real Islam. We also went to Gorkha [a hill district in Nepal] to visit the small villages there. These places are full of old people, women and small children. But hardly any young men. Most of them have gone to the Gulf to work. They have small mosques there, and we stayed in the mosques. It was very peaceful and heavenly. It was the perfect life, no stress, and we could live as real Muslims.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Rehmat: The Tablighi taught us how to do everything the true Muslim way, from eating, to dressing. You know, there is even a Muslim way of taking a bath! I also learnt a person can pray directly to God. There is no need to go through saints or other channels.

Researcher: But doesn't that go against what the Kashmiri Muslims believe?

Rehmat: Yes, but that is my personal belief. I do not try to convince others about it.

Researcher: How do your Kashmiri relatives feel about you joining the Tablighi?

Rehmat: We are family, you know? We do not fight about this. There are no problems between us. It is my personal belief. But I am very inspired by my father. He also did the Tablighi tour, a long time ago. He is a real Tablighi because he actually practises the teachings in real life.

Researcher: What about you? Do you practise the teachings in your life?

Rehmat: Looks at this [he points to his Ray-Ban sunglasses] and this [he points to his designer jeans]. I don't look like a Tablighi, do I?

Researcher: What does a Tablighi look like?

Rehmat: You know, wearing the loose pants, having a beard. I don't even have a beard! By the way I look, no one will believe that I had gone for the full forty-day tour. The effect of the Tablighi is temporary. I mean, you cannot be on tour forever, right? Once you return, you have to work and get involved in Kathmandu life. Two or three months after I returned, slowly, I went back to my old self. It was only during the Tabligh that we prayed five times a day. Here in Kathmandu, the majority are Hindu, and it is not a peaceful place to practise Islam.

Rehmat's mixed parentage played a significant role in his conversion from one sect to another, which in his account, is represented by his movement from the Kashmiri to Nepali mosques. Muslim society in Kathmandu is patriarchal – in marriages between members of different sects, it is the father who defines the sect that is to be followed by his wife and children. At the same time, the children are exposed to both sects as they socialize with their paternal and maternal relatives. Therefore, it is plausible that his mixed parentage predisposed Rehmat to conversion.

Rehmat's statement about having 'friends from both mosques' also hints that socialization in Kathmandu is not limited to religious sects. Rehmat socializes with a clique of rich, young Muslims, most of whom are educated in India. Their friendships are forged in boarding schools and exclusive clubs in Kathmandu, and it is their common lifestyle that unites them, rather than the mosque that they attend on Fridays. In fact, it is precisely these bonds that sectarianism seems unable to break apart – in one case, when one of his Nepali friends from the clique was in trouble with the police, Rehmat and another Kashmiri friend were the first ones to arrive to bail him out. Therefore, it is not surprising that he accepted his Nepali friends' invitation to go for Tablighi; from his narratives, he presented it as giving in to a friend's persistent cajoling rather than being forced to go under duress.

Rehmat also mentioned the villages where the young men had all gone to work in the Gulf. There is a common perception among the Kathmandu Muslims that the Muslims in 'the hills' are disadvantaged because they do not have religious leadership or the resources to learn about Islam. A member of the Tablighi Jama'at said that the absence of young men in the village makes the Muslims vulnerable to proselytization by the Christians, which is why the Tablighi Jama'at make it a point to go to these places during their tour.

Rehmat's discourse is important for what he underplays or does not say. During the conversation, he indirectly mentions his conversion from the Barelwi to the Deobandi sect, saying that a person can pray directly to God without having to go through "saints or other channels." When I asked if it is contrary to the beliefs of the Kashmiri Muslims, he immediately downplayed the significance of his new-found beliefs, saying that it is "personal." This is perhaps a reflection of the attitude of the Tablighi Jama'at which was noted by Metcalf:

To read Tabligh texts, to listen to Tablighis speak, you would not know that there were Hindus in India; you would not hear a word of internal debate. The movement has eschewed all debate and encourages participants to avoid criticism of other movements at any cost. (1994: 50).

However, for most Muslims the experience of Tablighi Jama'at is more textured than Metcalf has presented. In Kathmandu, it is not a question of *being* Tablighi, one *does* Tablighi. The word 'Tabligh' is usually used to denote a religious duty or a rite of passage that is to be performed or undertaken, and not a label which one uses to identify a person. When I first arrived in Kathmandu, I once asked one of my informants if he knew of any members of the Tablighi Jama'at. He looked at me in surprise and said, "Everyone is a member of the Tablighi Jama'at. We all have a duty to preach Islam. It just depends on how active you are."

Rehmat's experiences on the tour marked a fundamental change in his perspective. It was there that he learnt the totality of Islam, how it encompasses even the smallest detail of everyday life. Life on tour was 'perfect', an ideal which is unattainable in his daily life. The way that he describes the tour is similar to descriptions of pilgrimages (Metcalf 1990). The Tablighi tour, like the pilgrimage,⁴ is a study in liminality. The Tablighi/pilgrim is removed from his familiar environment and enters into a religious space and time where behaviour and actions have to be re-learned, where relationships between people are redefined and where every moment is spent in the pursuit of religious goals. Thus Tablighi/pilgrim is not his everyday self while on tour: religiously, he is the best that he can ever be.

However, two months after the tour, Rehmat admitted that he reverted to his 'old' self, implying that he was not able to keep to Tablighi principles in his everyday life. However, his re-immersion into Kathmandu life does not tarnish his perception of the Tablighi Jama'at. Rather than try to conflate the sacred and the secular, would require him to compromise his secular or religious principles, Rehmat's strategy for dealing with the difference in lifestyles is to totally separate them. He keeps a pristine version of the Tablighi tour in his mind, having decided beforehand that the demands of his everyday life in Kathmandu are incompatible with the Tablighi lifestyle.

⁴ Parallels have been drawn between the Tablighi tour and the Haj: according to Tablighi members, the tours are the next best option for those who are unable to go for the Haj.

The reason that Rehmat gave for not being able to observe his religious duties in Kathmandu was that the majority in Kathmandu are Hindus, and that Kathmandu is “not a peaceful place to practise Islam.” The implications of living in a Hindu kingdom are dealt in another chapter, but here I wish to relate a cautionary tale that a man once told me:

There was a man called Hameed who did a Tablighi tour. He was so convinced by their teachings that when he returned, he wanted to follow all the Prophet’s traditions. So he shaved his moustache and kept a long beard. At that time, he was staying in a Hindu⁵ area, and the people there are not so refined. When they saw Hameed’s changed appearance, they started to pick on him and call him names. He actually got beaten up by some Hindus, which drove him to move out of that area.

The narrator of the tale had been on a 3-day Tablighi Jama’at tour, and had disagreed with their emphasis on changing one’s physical appearance. On the other hand, the same tale was also told to me on another occasion by a Muslim who was pro-Tablighi Jama’at, who made the victim a hero for standing up for his Muslim values. However, they share in common the sentiment that Kathmandu is not a safe place for Muslims to express their piety.

The significance of physical appearance to the Tablighi Jama’at lies in the visual expression of difference from the Hindu environment. In her study of the Mewatis, Mayaram writes

To begin with, [Maulana Muhammad] Ilyas opened ten madrasahs in Mewat. He soon found, to his horror, that instead of becoming radical centres of change they were affected by the environment of ‘irreligiousness’ all around; a clean-shaven ex-student’s dress and appearance hardly indicated his being a Muslim. (1997: 225)

The issue with Rehmat and other young men who refuse to observe Tablighi rules about physical appearance is precisely that it makes them stand out from the

⁵ It should be noted that the term ‘Hindu’ is liberally used to describe all who are not Muslims. In this case, it was established that the ‘Hindus’ are actually Manangi, who are an ethnic group found in Nepal.

crowd. It was no accident that the girls in the next booth thought he was a male model; at the same time, Rehmat's carefully groomed appearance belies his claim that appearance is not everything. I cannot say whether Rehmat's appearance is a reflection of his personal taste in clothes or whether it is part of a strategy to assimilate himself with the Hindu majority; it is probably a mixture of both. But the contradiction that is Rehmat – an advocate of the Tablighi Jama'at who does not really follow its rules – is an indication of the conflict of faith that is affecting the young Muslim men in Kathmandu.

Responses to the Tablighi Jama'at in the subcontinent.

The 1990's has seen a profusion of works regarding the Tablighi Jama'at, mostly accounting for their spread and development in various countries around the globe. In comparison, however, little is known about the way that Tablighi Jama'at is contested by ordinary Muslims. Although the Tablighi Jama'at is Deobandi in ethos, resistance is not limited to those who are anti-Deobandi. Within the Deobandi sect, there are those who are critical of the Tablighi Jama'at and violently oppose their ideas and methods.

The issue of resistance to the Tablighi Jama'at is analyzed in Mayaram's study of the Meos in Mewat. When Maulana Muhammad Ilyas visited the area, he found the Mewatis to be 'semi-tribal' and 'more Hindu than Muslim' (Mayaram 1997: 224). It is said that this encounter with the Mewatis gave Maulana Muhammad Ilyas the impetus to initiate religious reform among Muslims. Parallels were drawn between the Mewatis and the Jahiliyya, the ignorant Arabs before the coming of Islam, which provided the Tablighi Jama'at with legitimization for the reform of the Mewatis.

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas first built ten madrasahs in Mewat, but it had limited effect on the Mewatis because they were reluctant to free their children from agricultural work to attend school. Maulana Muhammad Ilyas then tried to conduct Tabligh tours among the Mewatis, but these were also limited in their attempts at reform due to the reluctance of the locals to perform Tabligh. Unable to bring religion to the Mewatis, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas then decided to bring

the Mewatis to religion by sending groups of students to the religion centres of Deoband and Saharanpur. These students were then sent back to Mewat to instil religious reform into their fellow Muslims. Despite initial reservations by some religious leaders on the ability of the illiterate Mewatis to initiate religious reform, the results of Maulana Muhammad Ilyas' experiment were encouraging. In 1940, there was a continuous chain of Mewati jama'ats of 50-60 people which travelled to Delhi, Saharanpur, Raipur and other areas (Mayaram 1997: 226). Mosques and madrasahs were built, and with it, the number of religious scholars trained in the Deobandi sect grew.

However, Mayaram notes that the Mewati adoption of Tabligh was more ambivalent than the depiction by Ilyas' biographers. The attempt by the Tablighi Jama'at to appropriate Meo identity, equating the Meos with the Arab *jahiliyya* before the advent of Islam, was criticized by the Meo Barelwis who feel that the Tabligh have no right to call them '*kafir*' (unbelievers).

"Pirs, shrines and dargahs are under siege as arenas of authentic Islamic practice" (Mayaram 1997: 243). As a result of Tablighi missionary activities and the mushrooming of Deobandi madrasahs in Mewat, the Barelwis have been sidelined, reduced to "scattered madrasahs and marginalized Barelwi ulamas" (ibid. 244). Criticism has also come from other Meos, who feel that the education provided by the Tablighi Jama'at is purely for religious purposes and does not prepare them for the job market. There are also others who experience the Tablighi Jama'at as a series of prohibitions which have the effect of 'crushing Meo identity' (Mayaram 1997: 246).

However, Mayaram (1997) shows that the adoption of Tabligh by the Meos were due to historical as well as political factors. During the 1947 Partition, the Meos were placed in refugee camps in Delhi, the centre of the Tablighi Jama'at. There, the Tablighi Jama'at went into full swing; the refugee areas were divided into four zones and the Tabligh worked hard to bring religious awareness to the Meos. They explained that the Meos' tragedy and loss are punishment for not obeying the rules of Islam, and invited them to turn to God (Mayaram 1997:

227). Therefore, the Tablighi Jama'at provided not only an explanation for the Meos' suffering, but also a solution which was accepted and embraced by some Meos.

In aligning themselves with the Tablighi Jama'at, the Meos were, in effect, creating a group identity which gave them clout as an electoral bloc. Seen as a part of larger networks, Mayaram finds that they stand a better chance for getting electricity, irrigation, medical and educational facilities than the non-Meos in Rajasthan.

Role of the Tablighi Jama'at in Kathmandu

When Maulana Muhammad Ilyas founded the Tablighi Jama'at in the 1920's, the aim was to strengthen the Muslim community from within, so as not to be vulnerable to Hindu and Christian missionaries who were active at that time. The situation in Nepal is not so different. Although there are no obvious Hindu missionary groups, the active proselytization by Christian missionaries have made Christianity is the fastest growing religion in Nepal, with active conversions mainly occurring among the ethnic and artisan castes (Gurung 1998: 97). Figures for the conversion of Muslims to Christianity is not available, but it is no coincidence that the itineraries of the Tablighi tours coincide with some of the Muslim areas where there is active Christian missionary activity, such as Pokhara, Gurkha and the Tarai. It is an exercise in boundary maintenance (Metcalf 1994: 721) rather than boundary expansion, a fight against assimilation and syncretism to counter the threat of conversion to another religion.

If participation in the Tablighi Jama'at is not a feasible option for busy urban Muslims it has developed a unique character among the Kathmandu Muslims as a rite of passage for young men.⁶ Saleema was especially proud that her eldest son had gone for Tabligh. "Before that he did not even know how to pray. That is a way of learning," Saleema explained. As we sat in the kitchen, she

⁶ This, however, does not apply to young men from the Kashmiri mosque, for whom the tour is seen to be a threat to their religious practices.

told me about her son Jamal who is twenty and attends college for a diploma in science. Two years ago, he went for a 40-day Tabligh which took him from Gorkha to Pokhara. There were five of them, all young men in their teens and early twenties. According to the rules of Tablighi, they had to bring everything that they need with them including sleeping mat, cooking stove and food so that they do not inconvenience others during the tour. However, it is quite common to receive gifts of food from other Muslims along the way. With their supplies and the generosity of Muslims, they managed to spend only 900 rupees (less than nine pounds) for the 40-day tour. They go to people's homes -- Muslims only -- and they collect teenagers and young children to teach them about Islam. "Muslims in Pokhara didn't know much about Islam. They are only Muslim by name. They didn't know how to pray and they had Hindu names. The Tablighi people taught them everything about Islam, from birth to death, including *namaz*," she explained. She praised the fact that her son is now a practising Muslim, and is keen that all her sons should go for the tour. A man whose son was going to the Gulf to work also said to me, "I am not afraid that my son is going abroad. He has gone for Tablighi, so he knows what Islam is."

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to show the role of the Tablighi Jama'at in defining religious identity. Its reformist stance in opposing saint veneration has led to open conflict with the Kashmiri Muslims, for whom saint veneration is a central part of their religious identity. However, the antagonistic stance adopted by the Kashmiri Muslims to Tablighi ideas is not unique to Kathmandu. In other parts of Nepal and in India, tensions have always existed between the Deobandi and Barelwi groups, a division which is often crudely reduced to those who oppose saint veneration (Deobandi) and those who practise it (Barelwi).

This chapter has also shown the resistance to reformist ideas from within the Deobandi sect, i.e. by the Nepali Muslims. The opposition to Tablighi ideas is defined by the status of Muslims in an urban, Hindu milieu. The main criticism about the Tablighi Jama'at is that it shows too much emphasis on the external

expression of religious identity. In particular, the Tablighi Jama'at are challenging the established physical, linguistic and social vectors of Muslim identity. Islam in Kathmandu, whether it is Nepali or Kashmiri, is assimilative and unobtrusive. By insisting on a "Muslim way" of dressing, a "Muslim language" (Urdu) and temporal and spatial isolation from the Hindu milieu through the Tablighi tours, the Tablighi Jama'at is attempting to change the foundation of Muslim identity in Kathmandu, and ultimately, the way that Muslims live with their Hindu counterparts.

The resistance, however, is not total. Most Muslims commend the Tablighi's role in bringing Islam to the masses and it is seen as a rite of passage for young boys. At the national level, the Tablighi Jama'at is one of the few groups that is dealing with the issue of Christian proselytization which is seen as the biggest threat to Muslims, especially among those in the remote areas of Nepal. It is no coincidence that the Tablighi tours cover the areas where there is active Christian missionary work. At the moment, the attempt by the Tablighi Jama'at to assert Muslim identity as separate from that of the Hindus is being adopted at a personal, rather than a public level.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

Religious identity operates on various levels. Starting with the macro-level, the Muslims are defined by the state as a marginal group: not only were they lowly ranked in the caste hierarchy but they were effectively separated from the mainstream through various exceptions that were incorporated into the legal code. The Muslims interpreted their marginal status as evidence of their subjugation by the Hindu state. Although this did not have a direct impact on their religious identity (they were after all, allowed to practice their religion to a large extent), it fed into their identity as a religious minority and affirmed the dominance of the Hindu state with regards to Hindu-Muslim relations.

At the same time, the Hindu state has also shown itself to be tolerant of Muslims (allowing them special rights to marry their cross-cousins, for example). The intervention of the state in communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims and its support for Muslims at a time of crisis affirmed the loyalty of Muslims to the state, so much so that when there was a movement for secularism, the Muslims withdrew their support for fear of losing the favour of the state. The Hindu character of the state is of secondary importance to the Muslims, whose first priority is to show their loyalty to those who have protected them in the past. From this, we can conclude that at the macro-level, the Muslims are accommodative and acquiescent to the Hindu majority and to the Hindu system of government, which they see as the best protection against Hindu fundamentalism.

However, I would not go as far as Mines (1984) to say that the Muslims separate their religious and secular identities – the evidence in this thesis shows that the lines between the religious and the secular are blurred. While the Muslims appreciate the relative protection they have had in Nepal, they are not shy of calling it the land of *kafirs* and lamenting about the difficulties they face as a religious minority. The acquiescent attitude of the Muslims towards the Hindus

does not hide the (outwardly) subtle attempts to differentiate themselves from the Hindus, and their response to Islamic reform movements (Chapter Seven) clearly show that their secular interests are closely linked to their religious ones.

Having outlined the historical and contemporary contexts of Hindu-Muslim relations, I now turn to the religious identity at the micro-level. Chapters Six and Seven clearly show that religious identity is changeable; from one religion to another, from one sect to another or from one level of commitment to another. And with each transformation, the markers of religious identity changes. However, in the case of Nepal, the markers of identity for those who convert from Hinduism or Buddhism into Islam are influenced by the state, which has prohibited proselytization and, until recently, religious conversion. The fear of persecution has transformed the conversion ritual (converts insist that there is none) and for males, the visual markers of religious identity are non-existent. For the male converts interviewed in this thesis, religion is a 'private matter' that needs no social affirmation or validation. The markers of religious identity for them, then, is defined within the private sphere, such as the importance of prayer and learning in Islam. However, in addition to adopting new markers of religious identity, these converts have also taken on the identity of the Muslims as a minority population, in the way that they do not want to draw attention to themselves and play down their convert status.

The change of identity from one sect to another is equally problematic. Although the context in which this is expressed is limited to within the Muslim population, the implications are no less severe for those who are involved. The Kashmiri and Nepali Muslims represent not only two different styles of Islam, but also two different types of socio-religious organization. The Tablighi Jama'at, in converting Kashmiris to Deobandi Islam have struck at the heart of the Kashmiri ethos, which is grounded in notions of hierarchy, genealogy and history. Conversion from Kashmiri to Deobandi Islam not only implies social exclusion in this lifetime but also the next, as the individual is banned from being buried at the Kashmiri cemetery. The markers of identity here are subtle – the refusal to venerate saints or the well-timed exit from a *milad* – but the

implications are serious enough for the Kashmiri Muslims to ban the Tablighi Jama'at from proselytizing in their mosque.

In the above examples of religious conversion, there is a sense of religious essentialism involved, as these changes involve crossing over clearly defined boundaries. In the final part of religious conversion – the change in religious commitment – we move away from religious essentialism to a more secular interpretation of religious identity. This is illustrated by the resistance of the Deobandi Muslims to the Tablighi Jama'at. Although the Tablighi Jama'at are from the Deobandi school, they have had limited success among the Nepali Muslims because the ideas that they are promoting go against the Nepali markers of religious identity. For example, they have had little success in convincing Nepali Muslims to adopt a more 'Islamic' appearance simply because the Muslims are wary about drawing attention to themselves. Also, the idea of taking an 'Islamic break' (Kepel 1994) is not attractive to Muslims who do not have job security in the workplace. This presents a problem for the theory put forward by Robinson (1983) that exposure to Islamic law will lead Muslim society towards an "Islamic standard". The resistance of the Kathmandu Muslims to revivalism is not unlike the Gayo Muslims studied by Bowen (1993). Religious identity is not defined only by scripture, nor does it necessarily change in the face of exposure to scripture. This has implications for the study of Islam in the modern world, where the focus has been largely on revivalism as an unstoppable force, not unlike the way secularism was once thought be the eventual destination of all civil society. Just how far Islamic revivalism will change the Muslim world remains to be seen, but from this particular study, it is clear that although groups such the Tablighi Jama'at may gain new converts to its reformist ideas, the changes that it creates and the interpretation of its ideas are far from uniform. It is perhaps at the points of resistance that religious identity truly finds definition. It is hoped that by drawing out these points in this study of the Kathmandu Muslims, I have contributed towards the understanding of Muslim identity and society.

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