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Hindus and Buddhists, Targeted for Conversion, Struggle to Defend Dharma

Nepal, mankind's only Hindu nation, symbolic bastion of dharma, is being stormed by Christians and Muslims. Spirit blind secularist officials wink while semetic zealots flagrantly break anti-conversion laws. Fueled by foreign dollars, missionaries dig into dharma's high home.

By Hari Bansh Jha and N.N. Thakur, Kathmandu, Nepal.

The ancient Nepalese citadel of Himalayan Dharma is beseiged. Despite the official Hindu state status and anti-proselytization laws barring conversion, the nation's Hindus and Buddhists are being converted to Christianity and Islam by sophisticated outside missionary forces.

Christian Evangelism

On January 9, 1995, the Nepalese World Hindu Federation (WHF) held a reception for Nepal's Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Ministers and the members of the House of Representatives and charged Christian missions with illegal conversion of poor and ignorant Nepalese in backward areas by means of various temptations.

Prior to 1990, Christian missionary activity was dealt with severely under a village panchayat system backed by the monarchy. But after the overthrow of the

monarchy in 1990, political parties-the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal-raised their voice in favor of a secular state. Traditional sentiment was too strong and the constitutional provision that Nepal be a Hindu state was preserved. Conversion of religion remained banned under the new democratic government. But elected officials are making no effort to protect Hindu interests. Former Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala of the Nepali Congress (NC) is on record as having said in 1993, "If I want to change my religion, who is to stop me?" Despite public visits by officials to famous Hindu temples, the present Marxist/Leninist minority government has no ideological commitment to religion in any form and simply ignores missionary activity.

Christians are taking advantage of the situation. In a recent issue of Pulse magazine detailing world evangelism, David McBride, Kathmandu Christian correspondent, proudly reports, "Particularly spectacular numerical growth has been experienced since the democratic revolution of 1990, which allowed open evangelism for the first time, and the church as a whole has been taking advantage of that freedom." A 1960 census said Hindus form 89% of all Nepalese. The 1991 census showed a drop to 86% of the total 18 million, a decline of 3%. According to the 1991 census report, the population of Hindus (86%) was followed by the Buddhists (7%) and Muslims (4%). Saubhagya Shah reported in his article, "The Gospel Comes to the Hindu Kingdom," that each of the 75 districts in the country has at least one church and that Kathmandu Valley alone has over 100 churches and congregations. He also presents how the Christians plan to reach every home and set up a church in every village by the year 2000. [See below.]

Print media is a key tool. Kanchan and Udghoshana are two monthly Christian newsletters. Mahan and Bodhartha carry Bible excerpts, religious essays, church news and opinions on social issues. There are now several Christian bookstores throughout the country. In 1992, Nepal Bible Society (NBS) is reported to have distributed 5,896 Bibles, 14,126 New Testament digests, 183,450 other booklets and 557,300 pamphlets.

International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), like the World Lutheran Service, are very active. These INGOs launch projects in poverty-stricken regions such as small hydro-power development, health services and education, and gradually convert the people by giving them one temptation or the other. Free medical treatment, scholarships, employment or even ordinary work are used as incentives to readily convert those poor whose per capita income is merely US \$170.

Though the influence of Christian missions has grown throughout Nepal, their main focus is the districts around Kathmandu Valley which is being surrounded by new Christian converts. There is large-scale conversion particularly among the formerly Buddhist Tamang community living in districts like Kavrepalanchowk, Makwanpur, Dhading, Nuwakot, etc. Once the Kathmandu Valley is encircled by the Christians from all the sides, it will serve as a strategic center for national expansion.

For the most part, Hindu organizations remain silent spectators. The office bearers of WHF do not seem to have any vision as to how to deal with the invasion from the foreign religious missionaries. Even the Hindu Swyamsevak Sangh, a sister organization of Rastriya Swyamsevak Sangh of India, appears confused about how to deal with the foreign-dollar-fueled conversion thrust.

History bristles with examples where Christianity was used as a tool to promote political interest. Nepalese Hindus view its spread as a potential threat to Nepal's social, cultural, economic and political life.

Since the overthrow of the monarchy, evangelists are rarely punished. An exceptional arrest of 11 ethnic Nepalese and 10 Bhutanese evangelists last September led to three-year sentences. Concerns are being expressed among the Nepalese Christian community if this incident marks the beginning of enforcement of the country's anti-proselytism laws. But it is likely that Christian influence will only get stronger. It is backed by huge foreign funding and strong communication links to the West. Heavy dependence on the Western foreign aid-nearly 70% of the development expenditure-make politicians reticent to take action. The only way left to deal with the Christian missions is for Hindu organizations to establish health and educational institutions based on Hindu and Buddhist values, and to actively reconvert Nepalese to their mother religions.

Islamic Pressure Mounts

One of the unique features of Hindu religion of Nepal is its tolerance and respect for the other religions. This is more true in the relation between Hinduism and Buddhism. Tourist brochures often praise the "tolerant character of the Nepalese people." Hindus go to the Buddhist monasteries and Buddhists visit the

Hindu temples. Some deities like Pashupatinath, Muktinath or Gorakhnath are worshipped by both religions. A small Muslim population previously functioned harmoniously beside its two big brothers. But recent events portend a future of confrontation.

A few months ago, Salim Khan, president of Nepal Muslim Association, made a controversial announcement, "Today, statistical data on Muslims in Nepal reads 4 lakhs, far from the actual figure of 20 lakhs. Kathmandu valley alone has about 35,000 Muslims." If he is right Muslims constitute 12% of all Nepalese, a large variance from the official census figure of 3.5% in 1991. Promotion of this perception, right or wrong, has led to demands for rights. Abdul Gafur, General Secretary of Nepali Jama Masjid, and other Islamic leaders, are demanding national holidays during their religious festivals. Gafur said, "Our demands for public holidays on Eid and Bakrid and other Muslim festivals, airing news in Urdu, citizenship to the bonafide Muslims should be implemented at the earliest."

Many in Nepal are convinced that the days of amicable relations are over. In Nepalgunj, which is also called mini-Pakistan, communal rifts are now common-curfew is clamped down from time to time. Even from interior regions, like Dang, there is news of the bitterness developing between the two communities. Recently, in Saptari district some Muslim fundamentalists created problems for Hindus organizing their annual Saraswati Puja.

Muslims cleverly demolished their own very old, historic, small, Nepali Jams Masjid and a huge "spanking new marble-sided, multimillion petro-dollar-financed structure, many times larger, has been erected in its place," with support from international Islamic organizations. The Narayanhiti Royal Palace has been overshadowed, and on Fridays, traffic on Durbar Marg in Kathmandu is jammed by thousands of Namajees.

Since the Muslims faced no protest from any Nepalese community while constructing the new mosque, their morale was boosted. They now plan to flood Nepal with hundreds of mosques and madrasaas. There are also reports that Pakistani Muslim activists are holed up in Nepal and big oil money is flowing to do conversion work among the poor. This, along with immigration of Bangladeshi and Indian Muslims is building the Muslim population. In a classic economic pattern, already seen in downtown Port Louis in Mauritius and in many cities in India, rich Muslim businessmen are taking over strategic real-estate. In Kathmandu, places like

Thamel and Bag Bazar have now become dominated by Muslims. They, particularly the Kashmiri Muslims, pay the sky-rocketing rents for these premises.

Hindus everywhere are watchful of events in Nepal, knowing it is a precious international archive of Sanatana Dharma for all mankind. Though under seige from outside forces, it remains, for now, a Hindu state with laws against unethical conversion. Time is running out if Hindus are to fulfill the urgent needs for active programs of dharma-based education and social upliftment in Nepal.

Sidebar: Massive Modern Crusades Target Third World

Text:

A recent report from the Houston Chronicle alerts the world that serious modern Christian crusades are underway. A recent meeting of 800 Christian leaders in Nepal launched implementation of "Nepal 2000," part of a global movement whose main fields of activity will be Asia, Africa and Latin America. Started in 1977 by the Southern Baptist Convention, the group then launched a programme named Bold Mission Thrust. Their goal was to take the gospel to everyone in the native language by 2000. Later, the Southern Baptist leaders realized that the goal was impossible. Then a meeting of 10 mission organizations was held to consider collaboration and prepare for the 1989 Global Consultation on World Evangelization, which gave birth to the "AD 2000 and Beyond" organization, Colorado, USA. Director Luis Bush, says, "A church for every people and the gospel for every person by AD 2000" is the aim of the 5-year-old organization. The year 2000 has been chosen as many Christians believe that the world will end that year. Therefore, they wish to "save" as many souls as possible. The international organisation collects and promotes evangelization plans from the world over. Its activities include evangelization research and data bank development, recruitment of specific groups like women, youth and pastors as evangelizers and Bible and gospel literature evangelism. The Chronicle says that there are 2,000 plans at present, including national plans in Canada, Costa Rica, Nigeria and Bangladesh. In May of 1995, about 44,000 leaders from 200 countries are meeting in Seoul, South Korea, for another Global Consultation on World Evangelization. Again, Asia, Africa and Latin America will be the main fields of mission activity.