

# Contested Secularism and Religious Conflict in Nepal

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Master's Degree programme in Religion, Conflict and Dialogue  
March 2019

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Title of thesis Contested Secularism and Religious conflict in Nepal			
Discipline: Religion, Conflict and Dialogue (RCD) Masters program			
Type of work Master's Thesis	Month and year 8 April 2019	Number of pages 74	
<p>Abstract</p> <p>In the context of newly introduced secularism in Nepal, the qualitative study discuss different aspects of Nepalese society where religious tension is emerging. The objective of the study is to explore the understanding of religious leaders on secularism and their idea of religious rights. Based on interviews with these leaders (Islam, Hindu and Christian), the thesis describes how their understanding of secularism contrasted in daily life.</p> <p>Based on primary and secondary information, the study further deals about how religious tensions are evolving among different religious groups. Furthermore, it helps to understand how Nepalis secularism differs from western modal of secularism and explains different reasons why the ideal definition of secularism (separation of church and the state) could not be practical one in Nepalese society.</p> <p>The hope of religious equality beaten when the constitution barred to religious conversion. Though conversion is not allowed, different Christian organizations are conducting missionary activities. Consequently, police actions are increased against Christians on the charge of conversion. Christians are raising voice against state interference in religion. They are demanding conversion right if the state is secular. Secularism has been interpreted as a right to convert people, other features of secularism has become minor. Hindus have perceived secularism as a threat to Hinduism. Hindu nationalism emerged against secularism, it has created fear among minority groups. The thesis also explains the view of the Muslims community in the context of the rise of Hindu nationalism and missionary activities of Christians. Contestation on Secularism not only polarize people of religious groups but also political parties. Religion has become a political agenda, the demand for a referendum against secularism has become an issue of the political campaign of non-communist and pro monarch parties. These anti-secular movements are supported by Indian political parties, Indian leaders and different Hindu organizations around the world.</p> <p>In the end, this thesis concludes that there is a need for the interference of the state to end the dominance of Hinduism as well as protect the basic human rights of people where religion suppresses it. The state needs to support minority religious groups to flourish it. The thesis also signifies the need for interreligious dialogue among religious groups to restore harmony and tolerance.</p>			
Keywords: secularism, constitution, religious rights, minority, Christianity, Nepal.			
Place of storage Helsinki University Library, Library of the Central Campus, Theology			
Other information			

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## 1. Introduction

A hope of freedom and equality strengthened among Nepali people with the promulgation of the new constitution in 20th September 2015. The Constitution has historical value in the sense that it was the first constitution drafted by the Constituent assembly, furthermore, it declared Nepal as a secular, federal democratic, republican state. Hence, one of the hot issues of the constitution is secularism that ended two hundred years old Hindu dominance. Monarchy and Hinduism were the main foundations of the state governing system since Nepal's unification in the 18th century.

Afterwards, of the declaration of secular status, Nepal is facing numbers of socio-political and religious challenges. Hindu groups are protesting the secular status of the state. They are demanding to reverse Nepal as a Hindu country. While minority religious groups are claiming secularism defined by the constitution is not well enough to secure their religious rights and freedom. Especially, Christians are at the front expressing their dissatisfactions. The constitution does not allow one person to change another person's religion. The constitution secures an individual's right to choose religion but, influencing people to change their religion is punishable. Hereafter, Christians are not happy with the constitution that outlaw missionary activities. Different national and international Christian organizations expressed their disappointment regarding the issue.

Although the constitution does not allow conversion, it has become irresistible. So, Hindu activists are demanding strong actions to curb religious conversion. In addition, other religious groups like Islam and Kirat<sup>1</sup> are arguing that the present constitution still restricted their freedom for cultural activities. They are demanding to revert legal protection of cow that they could slaughter cow/ox for meat. According to them, declaring cow as a national animal prohibited indigenous people's rights to the practice of their spiritual ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> Like the

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<sup>1</sup> A religion practiced by indigenous and tribe people

<sup>2</sup> For detail see, <https://www.indigenousvoice.com/en/law-banning-cow-slaughter-infringe-indigenous-peoples-rights-in-nepal.html> ; retrieved on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

previous constitutions of 1967 and 1990s, present constitution too declared Hindu's holy animal cow as a national animal. Legal protection of cow has been alleged as the state favoritism for Hinduism.

Regarding the restriction on conversion and cultural activities, the conception of secularism become a disputed issue of the new constitution. The dispute has turned Nepali society a fertile ground of conflict. In the context of the rise of conflict, the objective of the thesis is to know the understanding of religious leaders about secularism. Religious leaders and their understanding play a vital role in shaping interreligious relations. On this setting, the research question of the thesis is "What are the perspectives and understandings of different religious leaders<sup>3</sup> (Muslim, Christian, and Hindu) on the secularism and its practical implication on society?"

This thesis would further explore their expectations and reality. It would ultimately give a picture of how secularism is shaping Nepal's multi-religious societies.

Sub research questions

- a. How do religious leaders understand secularism?
- b. How does the contested secularism affect Nepalese society?

## 2. Research methodology

### 2.1 Statement of problem

Secularism supposed to end religious inequality and bring peace among different religious groups, but contradictory tensions are on the surface. Different minority groups are disappointed with religious rights secured by the new constitution. Minority religious groups are not happy with definition of secularism. Hence concept of secularism became highly debatable issues. Hindus are furious on increasing Christian population. While the emergence of

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<sup>3</sup> In the research religious leaders refers to Imam, Priest, and father (or people from church).

Hindu nationalism has threatened the religious rights of minority groups as well as the secular stance of the country.

In the context of rising conflict, this thesis would be helpful to understand the relationship among different religious groups and their understanding of secularism. It also explains how the religious tension is turning out as a conflict.

## 2.2 Operational definition and site selection

In the study, religious leader means those who are actively religious and can mobilize people, like imam, priest, and father (people from church). Religious leaders do not include politically active leaders. I visited the local Temple, Masjid, and Church to meet these religious leaders.

For field visit, I chose Nepalganj sub-metropolitan city of Banke district of Nepal, where people of different religions have lived together for decades. They have a shared history of peace as well as some incidents of religious clashes. Though minority religious groups always felt marginalized, Muslims of Nepalganj supported for Hindu country than a secular one. In 2010, Muslims of Nepalganj demanded to reverse Nepal as a Hindu country, while the interim Constitution of 2007 had already declared Nepal a secular country. According to the source, Muslim feared off increasing missionary activities of Christians in a secular country and possible religious tension, if the constitution of Nepal fully endorsed secularism. Referring interviews with Muslim leaders, an Indian newspaper wrote that Muslim would feel safe in a Hindu country than a secular one.<sup>4</sup> Hence, I purposively selected this site to explore religious leaders' understanding of secularism, and their concern for supporting Hindu country.

## 2.3 Research design and data collection

Since this research is all about the social state and phenomenon, a qualitative approach is used. Different scholars have pointed out the different weaknesses

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<sup>4</sup> For detail see; <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/muslims-in-nepal-demand-a-hindu-state/articleshow/48456574.cms> ; retrieved on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

and strengths of the qualitative approach. Masue, et.al (2013) claimed that qualitative research could be bias because of the personal impression of the author. Rubin and Rubin (1995) claimed that the qualitative research method is one of the significant ways to study the social, anthropological and livelihood aspect in research.

As my thesis discusses the effect of contested secularism on religious groups, the point made by Rubin and Rubin matches with my research objective. I preferred a qualitative one for my thesis. To control personal biases, I strictly followed research ethics to control my personal impression. Beside that triangulation method was used.

#### 2.4 Sample design

Since the research is qualitative in nature, to find the religious leaders and people, random sampling method. I randomly visited religious places (Mosques, Temples, and Churches). This study is based on primary and secondary information. Different books by national and international scholars are used to discuss secularism. Some websites of minority religious groups are chosen as a source of information because issues on minority groups are less attractive for mainstream media and academia of Nepal. Different national daily newspapers are also referred to analyze circumstances and cross-check information gathered from interviews.

Merely relying on secondary information could be biased, hence I am using primary information too. Among the different data collections method, I preferred the 'interview' as a data collection method for my thesis. Interview method also helps to cross-check available secondary data and explore more deeply. Practically, I agreed with Bryman (2016) who claimed that interviews are more likely to provide more accurate data than other sources with a high degree of flexibility. From the interview method, we can get authentic information, that could be cross-checked between different interviewee as well as other sources. During interviews, I took notes while they spoke. Because of

the sensitivity of the issue, I did not use a recorder, but I wrote down precisely what they said.

For primary data, I conducted intensive interviews with 9 religious leaders and 6 people. Three religious leaders and 2 people from each faith (Muslim, Hindus, Christians) were interviewed. Though there are different thoughts regarding the sample size in qualitative research, Sandelowski (1995) explained that sample size is important, according to the author number of the sample should be big enough to ensure data saturation and analysis. While some scholar contradicted Sandelowski, explained that if the sample size in qualitative research is too large then extracting research findings would be difficult from dense data (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2007). While in my case, I decided to have a small sample size since my research is limited by time and resources.

## 2.5 Research ethics

Research ethics is one of an important aspect of research, it also checks and balances biases of a researcher and reduce being research messy (Baker 1994). Following research ethics on my thesis, I explained the objective of my thesis to each interviewee. I requested 30 minutes of their time for a meeting. Full flexibility was provided to the interviewee that they could deny and decline any question if they do not like to answer. Often, interviewees asked me how they would be benefitted if they participated in the interview. It was a very difficult question for me to answer because I could not do anything to solve their problem. However, I answered that their views will go to a broader audience and other people would know the interreligious relationship of this place. Following research ethics, as the issues of the interview are sensitive, I assured confidentiality of their information.

During interviews, I found very different expression of religious leaders, Hindus, and Christian leaders were easily ready for the interview to express their dissatisfactions. But Imams were hesitating to participate in the interviews. They said that they did not want to come front because of the sensitivity of the issue. After assurance to keep them anonymous, they became ready to participate in

the interviews. An elderly imam declined from interview reasoning he could not answer my questions because he is old, but he referred another Imam. Semi-structured and opened ended questionnaire was used for interviews (for detail see appendix).

## 2.6 Data analysis and coding

Data analysis is done in a qualitative way. The specific techniques to interpret qualitative data is a simple way of explaining and analyzing the findings. Here in this research, it is to make clear how the social relation has gone through the changes after secularism. The analysis is done after summarizing the key points after each interview and categorizing them under the research objectives.

During interviews, some of the respondents requested to keep anonymous, so coding was used to cite their arguments instead of their name.

Here is the descriptive coding cited in the thesis.

Religious leaders	Hindu leaders	Christian leaders	Muslim leaders
	H1: First Hindu priest	C1: First Father	M1: First Imam
	H2: Second Hindu Priest	C2: Second Father	M2: Second Imam
	H3: Third Hindu Priest	C3: Third Father	M3: Third Imam
Religious people	HW: Hindu Women	CM: Christian men	MM: Muslim man
		CW: Christian women	MM2: Muslim Man 2
		CM2: Christian man 2	MY: Muslim Youth

## 2.7 Triangulation and validation of data

I used number of news articles and information from Christian websites as secondary information, there could be a question for the validity of data, so I used the triangulation method to nullify error. On triangulation, to make the information free from the biases, the information received from one source was verified through another source. Some secondary data were also corrected by interviews. For instance, one of the secondary sources' information was claiming that Muslim of Banke district were supporting Hindu country. But data

from interviews came with the contradictory result. It explored that Muslims who are affiliated under a political party could go for a Hindu country, but ordinary Muslim wants a secular country.

That proves the strength of the interview as one of a good method of data collection. Bryman (2016, 695) accepting the strength of interview in qualitative method wrote that interviews are an authentic source of information because of the presence of researcher at the research site and his/her participation during the interview. Though I do not have a bigger sample, but every aspect of major information obtained was checked either by the next interview or through media analysis. This step helped to fix the error of any information misinterpreted or exaggerated.

### 3. Secularism: a contested idea around the world

In today's world, with the advancement of modern technology people are believing in science than any supernatural things. In the old days, religion used to have a strong connection with people's life. State and religion used to be part of the state governance. But nowadays, Religion is not a significant part of state affairs. Many countries have introduced secularism with the belief of separation from religious affairs. But often these nations are questioned for the nature of their secularism.

The practice of "secularism" around the world has been questionable since the beginning. The word secularism itself is not definitive it has carried different meaning at a different time. According to Bremmer (2008), the word "secular" and "secularization" originated in ancient Rome during early Christendom, at that time the meaning of the word was "long duration of time" (p. 432). Etymologically, the origin of the word was from saeculum and the word has been used in different senses since then. In the 17th century, the word had been used to define "long-lasting" (Ertit 2018). Meaning of the word changed during the period to "long-lasting" from "long duration". Throughout early middle ages, scholars of Christian theology used the word "saeculum" "as the world in which we live, a world that is characterized by sin and the rejection of God" (Bremmer 2008, 432). According to Shiner, there was no clear understanding among the scholars about the meaning of secularization and its use (Ertit 2018). However, some scholars used the word 'secularization' to define the relationship between society and religion.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of secularization became a leading issue in the field of sociology of religion. There was also a school of thought which denied the use of the word "secular" for the relation of society and religions (Ertit 2018). Martin argued secularization should not be used in sociological literature to explain the relationship between religion and society because it was used as an

ideology in the 1960s (ibid). By contrast, Bryan Wilson claimed that secularization did not have an ideological aspect so as it can be used to express the declining relationship of religion and the state (Ertit 2018).

Hence, due to uncertainty and confusion on meaning and use of the word, Shiner argued that the concept of secularization described as a servant with more than one master (Ertit 2018). The use of the word significantly dependent on its master, that also reflects the reason behind the present contestation on secularism around the world.

Nowadays the terminology is widely on use to specify separation of the religion and the state, however, which level of separation proves the absolute secularity of the state is still unclear. Several cases from different countries have shown that none of them have an absolute type of secularity as its definition. Several times secular states are blamed for not being secular in real meaning. These so-called secular states still somehow are having an influence on religious issues. Different European countries and the USA which are called as the architect of the secularism faced controversy at different times. For instance, secularism of different European countries came on the debate when they banned Muslim outfit at public places. France, Bulgaria, Denmark, Belgium, Austria completely banned wearing Muslim scarf, hijab, niqab, and burqa at public places. While some countries Switzerland, Russia, Italy, Spain, The Netherlands banned it partially. The action of these secular states to ban Muslim outfit at public places alleged as an attack on the rights of a religious minority. In other words, we can say in this case, the state could not keep itself far from religion, which contradicted the value of a secular state. It also denied an individual's right to wear traditional clothes. The banning was taken as the denial of religious and culture rights of minority groups of people that raised the question of how far European countries are secular in real meaning.

In Europe, religious diversity and recognition of religious minorities vary from country to country. For instance, differences were clear in various debates on banning hijab and burqas for Muslim people. France the first country in Europe that banned full-face Islamic outfit in public places defended their action concerning the issue of sovereignty of the state and its sovereign use of power.

On the case of France and its secularism, Bhargava (2014, 217) described that "the idealized French conception holds that there must be "freedom of the state from religion," but state retains a power to interfere in church-based religions. According to him, the state may interfere to hinder and suppress or even to help religion, but in all cases, this must be done only to ensure its control over religion. That clearly showed there is a direct relation of religion and the state at least one-way. Not only France, but there are also other countries in the EU where political parties adhering Christianity run a government that put the state closer to religion and religious people. Some European countries still provide support to Christianity and churches against the value of secularism. For instance, Presbyterian Church in Scotland, the Lutheran Church in all Nordic countries, the Orthodox Church in Greece are getting support from the state (Bhargava 2014).

Alexander Görlach doubted nature of secularism of European countries wrote a column on the title "as if God did not exist" in a magazine "The European" gave some examples of European countries where religion still holds an important role. According to him, her Majesty the Queen is head of the Church of England. She holds the title "Defender of the Faith". He also doubted on the nature of secularism of Germany where the head of state swears to God for his/her true service. According to Görlach, the German constitution and state-level constitutions mentioned god and

refers to man's responsibilities before God.<sup>5</sup> There is also a claim that the flag of the EU is obeying Christianity. It is claimed that the flag with a blue background and a circle of 12 yellow stars has a coded Christian message.<sup>6</sup> Based on these facts, we can say Secularism does not go as it is defined in literal meaning in Europe too.

In comparison to Europe, the United States is strikingly religious (Eisgruber 2006). The US has been a secular country since 1787 but it continued supporting religious institutions till 1947 (Sandel 1998). The Constitution of the United States of America clearly specified that state and government shall not establish a church, a citizen has the right to follow a religion of his or her choice or not (ibid). Furthermore, it also assured that Congress cannot make any law regarding an establishment of religion or barring the free exercise of religion. However, there is a religious revival in the USA even after all these constitutional provisions (Scanlon 2003). Due to a kind of religious revival and increasing connection of religion and politics, legal scholars of the USA claimed that secularization in the USA was mistaken (Cesari and McLoughlin 2016). It suggested that religion is becoming an increasingly powerful force in American politics (ibid). For instance, Protestant fundamentalism has become a force in American politics, that always played a strong role in the policy and strategy of the country,<sup>7</sup> often creates doubt on the secular status of the state.

We can take a recent travel ban plan as an example of contested secularism of the USA. On 27 January 2017, Donald Jr Trump, president

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<sup>5</sup> For detail see; <https://www.theeuropean-magazine.com/alexander-goerlach--2/6722-european-secularism>; retrieved on 26 Jan 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Arsène Heitz, a French Catholic who designed the flag in 1955, drew inspiration from Christian iconography of the Virgin Mary wearing a crown with 12 stars. The same 12 stars appear on all euro coins. For detail see; <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/18/world/europe/a-more-secular-europe-divided-by-the-cross.html>; retrieved on 4 July 2018.

<sup>7</sup> For detail see; [www.people-press.org/1996/06/25/the-diminishing-divide-american-churches-american-politics/](http://www.people-press.org/1996/06/25/the-diminishing-divide-american-churches-american-politics/); retrieved on 12 March 2019.

of the USA introduced travel ban plan for people of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>8</sup> People protested the ban and interpreted as Muslim ban. Although, Mr. Trump explained that the reason for the ban is security. He said this ban is not against Muslim. He claimed that it was introduced to keep America safe from terrorism. But many people disagreed because these banned countries are Muslim majority country.<sup>9</sup> It was guided by one of the assumptions that people of these countries could be a security challenge to the USA. In other words, it was presumed that people of these countries could have a link with terrorism. The case of the travel ban in the USA is quite close to the case of Muslim outfits bans in Europe. Linking a religion with terrorism and portraying people of that religion as possible suspect could not favor religious equality and secularity of any states. It is one of the representative cases that questioned the nature of secularism, where states have legally enforced religious inequality by introducing bans against certain groups. Not only the USA but also European countries are fearing from the establishment of Islam. Europe perceived Islam as a potential threat to the secularism of Europe. Cesari and Mcloughlin (2016) asserted that when the debate of banning of Muslim outfits in public was going on, there were arguments that in Islam there is no separation between the politics and the religion', so the establishment of Islam is a threat to secularism (ibid).

These cases have demonstrated that either there are no nations adopting secularism perfectly or the concept of secularism itself is not clear. While in another sense we can say that different countries have adopted their own modal of secularity. Each state has defined its own secularity with their own way, hence, secularism around the world is contradicted. It proved Shiner's (1967) argument that secularism is dependent upon its

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<sup>8</sup> For detail see; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jun/26/muslim-americans-trump-travel-ban>; retrieved on 13 October 2018.

<sup>9</sup> For detail see; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/38794001> ; retrieved on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

master/the state how it wants to use. Hence, the definition of secularism is dependent upon the background of a country, especially on the religious nature of societies, that makes it diverse from country to country.

Society and community play a vital role in shaping the concept of secularism. Berger et al. (2008) said secularization refers to focus on the bible and the church if the societies are homogeneous Christian. In the same line of thought, Davie argued that visiting frequency to church and believing in supernatural things are the issue of secularization in Christian communities (Ertit 2018). While the same word secularization refers to faith criteria and worshipping practices in a Muslim majority community (ibid). Explanation and practice of the word “secular’ changes as societies changes. Hence, the concept of secularism is versatile.

Different countries have adopted secularism in a different way. While, western theorists of secularism are not ready to recognize non-Western modal as real secularism (Bhargava 2014; Maurya 2016). Even western countries and USA are blamed for crossing religious line against the value of western model secularism. Resolving the debate on the contested nature of secularism and its definition, Berg-Sørensen (2013) argued that accepting the western model as the masterpiece is the reason for the contestation and making people ignore other types of secularism. There is also an argument that secularization is a process so there could be different stages of secularism (Bhargava 2013). According to Bhargava, we have failed to recognize multiple secularisms because our imagination is severely controlled by the mainstream, Western type (ibid).

Hence, secularism is not limited as separation of politics and religion. Bhargava (2014) and Maurya (2016) argued that separation of the church and the state is the typical secularism of western type and based on Christianity. Some scholars stated that demographic diversities of a country play a significant role to make secularism of one country different

than the others. Hence the mainstream secularism is quite different from the eastern countries where societies are not homogenous (Bhargava 2014). Population demography and religious composition play a strong role in the secularism of the state, he claimed that present Europe is less secular than the past because of increasingly diverse populations (Bhargava 2013; Bhargava 2014).

Let's discuss the Indian model of secularism where diversified population made the secularism different than the western model. India a secular country often come on controversy because of its intervention on religious issues. India supports temples, universities, and monasteries with a significant amount of funding to operate them that is against the value of a secular state (Acevedo 2013). The Constitution of India allows the relationship between the state and religion which is denied in the western model of secularism. Indian scholars opined that Indian secularism not only focuses on state and religion separation but also the role of the state to promote equality among diverse religious groups (Bhargava 2014; Maurya 2016). Indian constitution allows the state to interfere on religious issues. For instance, Indian secularism rejects casteism and all types of discriminations persisting in all religious groups (ibid).

Indian constitution has announced India as a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic country. It assures equality of all people of different background (Abhyankar 1997). However, there are plenty of issues, which makes Indian secularity also contested. According to the Indian constitution, the fundamental rights and the right to equality article 15-64 promised for equal opportunity and support for all its citizens irrespective of religion, caste, ethnicity, and gender (ibid). However, there are plenty of cases where people of minority felt discriminated from the state. For instance, Muslims claim they are discriminated by the state because of

their religion, they blame the state for being biased.<sup>10</sup> Another example is the rise of Hindu hardliners and occupying the key position of the government and their controversial decisions against minority groups.<sup>11</sup> Hence, there are plenty of cases that make Indian peculiar secularity also contested.

Due to the variations of the model of secularity in the world, it is also said that the ideal definition of secularism as separation of church and the state had become an old concept. It was developed in the context of predominantly single-religion societies after religious homogenization had already taken place (Bhargava 2014). If the country has mixed religious societies then it is not possible to have a western modal of secularism. He claimed that increasing migration and heterogeneous societies have become a challenge to European secularism (ibid) because of revival of the religions (Bhargava 2014).

Accepting the revival of religion and countries being less secular, Berger (1997, 974) argued that the legitimacy of the word secular and secularization has been finished. According to their argument, the assumption of secularism was people would leave believing in religions with the development of modern science. But it is not happening so the concept of secularism has been outdated. They claimed that the theory of secularization had collapsed because there are religious revivals all around the world. It is an outdated theory. For example, Peter Berger (1997, 974) argued the following with respect to the concept of secularization;

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<sup>10</sup> For detail see; <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2100513/modis-party-stokes-anti-muslim-violence-india-report-says> ; retrieved on 23 May 2018.

<sup>11</sup> For an instance, A Hindu leader Yogi Aditya Nath holds the chief minister position of Uttar Pradesh (a state of India) inflamed the debate how state run by the head of a particular religion could be secular? Different decisions of Uttar Pradesh government have been blamed for being discriminatory for minority religious groups, especially for Muslims. For detail see; <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2100513/modis-party-stokes-anti-muslim-violence-india-report-says>; retrieved on 23 May 2018.

I think what I and most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake. Our underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. It wasn't a crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it's basically wrong. Most of the World today is certainly not secular. It's very religious...

These are just some examples of a different country, there might be more cases that could explain the contested nature of secularism worldwide. However, secularization has been accepted as a concept that speaks about decrement on religion. But there is still enough space to define the degree of the secularization of a country. It is essential to understand how and why secularization of one country could be contested on the perspective of others. For instance, how France and other European countries would remain secular even after interfering religious issue on the name of state sovereignty and security? How minority groups of these countries would feel safe in modern heterogeneous societies when the state itself enforce religious inequality? And in the Indian context, how state intervention to promote equality could not be a secular one? And How the Indian government would defend itself being secular when Hindu activists are holding key positions of government fearing minority groups?

Hence, the variety of secularisms proves the fact that secularism is a contested concept. The mainstream concept of separation of the church and state is not enough to define the secularism of diverse world. Different other variables like liberty and toleration, equality and impartiality, neutrality and universality etc. are also important variables in-between state and religion. These variables play a significant role to make a different version of secularism in a different country with a different society.

A state must be committed to peace, religious freedom, inter-religious and intra-religious equality. These variables validate different types of secularism like Indian secularism or French secularism, though their models are also not free from contestation.

However, the complication about the meaning of secular continues to become a contested concept. Nepal's secularism is not perfect either, but it is up to Nepalese people and the state how they promote its secular status and define its secularity.

#### 4. Background of Nepal

Nepal has diverse populations. There are 126 castes/ethnic groups, speaking 123 languages. There are ten major religious groups (CBS 2012). Though the country has diverse populations with different cultures and religions, it remained a Hindu country for almost two centuries.

In this section, we discuss the different aspect of the relationship of the state and religions. Furthermore, we explore the governance system in the past and its connection with Hinduism. We also talk about the suffering of minority people in Hindu country. In different undemocratic rules, the state forced minority religious people to either join Hinduism or remain marginalized. The state promoted casteism and Hindu beliefs through its legal code and constitutions. The state indorsed inequality and discrimination based on religion, caste and class.

In addition, we also explore the connections of religious discrimination and inequality with Maoist insurgency and religious conversions.

##### 4.1 State and Religion

The history of modern Nepal started after unification dated back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Before unification, Nepal was divided into numerous small

states. Those states or principalities have their own culture and religions (Thapa 2013).

The reason behind the unification was to bond small countries into one that could stand against the British empire. The British empire named as East India company was extending in Indian states. Besides that, unification of Nepal was guided by religious sentiments of the King of Gorkha (Hachhethu 2003; Pradhan 2002; Upreti 2010; Pradhan 2005). After Muslim and British rule, India was not supposed as pure Hindu state so the motive for the unification of Modern Nepal by King Prithvi Narayan Shah was to make a pure-Hindus state (*Asli Hindustan*) (ibid). King Prithvi Narayan Shah had initiated unification in 1768 and his successors continued it. Due to the assimilation of different small states and principalities, Nepal became a country of different culture and religions. However, the state had been building a single national identity by assimilating all diverse groups through one language and one religion policy (Gaige 2009; Pradhan and Shrestha 2005). Imposition of one language and one religion policy undermined the religious and cultural freedoms of ethnic and religious minorities who were annexed into modern Nepal (Gaige 2009). According to this policy, to become a Nepalese citizen, one must speak Khas language, accept the caste system, follow the Hindu religion and wear Nepali dress (Gurung 2010). Hence, people of diverse religious groups that were annexed into modern Nepal had to accept Hinduism to be a decent citizen of the country. State governance system was guided by Hindu religion and Hindu belief. Laws and Justice were influenced by Hindu caste status until 1854 (Thapa 2013). The responsibility of justice was assigned to *Dharmaadhikari*<sup>12</sup>.

Shah dynasty ruled directly till 1846. Rana's autocratic regime controlled all the state authority and limited the monarchy as symbolic in 1846. The

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<sup>12</sup> Who has the knowledge of religion, prelate

first prime minister of Rana regime Jung Bahadur<sup>13</sup> brought the Code (*Maliki Ain 1854*) as a main law of the state. The Code (*Muliki Ain 1854*) followed guidelines of Hinduism as the basis of law, described people's rights relying on Hindu caste hierarchy. The code strongly enforced casteism and strengthened caste-based discrimination (Pradhan and Shrestha 2005), some part of the code described as follows:

“It is the Hindu Kingdom... It is a sacred land (*punyabhumi*)...It is the only kingdom where Hindus rule in this Kali Age... This law has been made in the light of the scriptures (*shastras*), tenets of moral conduct (*niti*), and the experience of the people (*lokko anuhbhav*). (HMG 1854, article 4, 11)”

Rana regime was thrown in 1951. For eight years till the 1960s, Nepal enjoyed a multi-party democracy system. In 1960 King Mahendra suspended the newly elected parliament and imposed the sole rule of the monarch by a system called *Panchayat*<sup>14</sup>. After 1962, because of different movements and protest, laws became more flexible and liberal, provided different rights to people. Constitution of 1962s allowed all people to practice their religion that is from their ancestors. But country legalized Hinduism as the state religion in the constitution. Rights to religious practice and freedom in the constitution of 1962 described as;

“Every person may profess his own religion as handed down from ancient times and may practice it having regard to the traditions” (HMG 1962).

But the above-mentioned right of laws followed by a clause stating,

“...Provided that no person shall be entitled to convert another person from one religion to another.” (ibid).

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<sup>13</sup> He initiated hereditary prime ministership of his family called a Rana regime

<sup>14</sup> Panchayat was the party-less political system adopted by King Mahendra in 1962 which lasted until the popular people's uprising led by democratic forces in 1990

Though the constitutions of 1962 abolished all kinds of discrimination and untouchability, it allowed people to have faith, but it strongly prohibited converting a person from one religion to another. It stated that if anybody attempts to convert another person's religion that person shall be punished with three years of imprisonment. Anybody who successfully converts somebody from one religion to another shall be punished with six years of stringent imprisonment. In the case of a foreigner, they shall be expelled from the country after completion of six years of imprisonment. Legal documents of the state were also protective for the Hinduism and its followers than others. Raising voice against these discriminations was unimaginable until 1991 because of the frequent undemocratic rules (Middleton and Schneiderman 2008). In 1990s first democratic constitution is promulgated, the constitution introduced a multi-party parliamentary system in the country, afterward people felt comparatively equality and freedom than the past. However, this constitution also paved the same path as the previous one, it also declared Nepal as a Hindu kingdom. The constitution had jointly written with the consensus between Monarchy and political parties (Lawoti 2005). The constitution made the monarchy ceremonial, but the palace was still powerful. Declaration of Nepal as a Hindu state ignored minority groups furthermore it symbolically classified non-Hindus as a second-class citizen (Gurung and Bhandari 1993; Lawoti 2005, 126).

Like the previous constitution of 1962s, people could have faith in different religions that is handed down by ancestors. The constitution said, "Every person may profess his own religion as handed down from ancient times and may practice it having regard to the traditions" (HMG 1990). If we compare the constitutions of 1962s and 1990s, there were no special changes for the religious rights of people. The provision of the Hindu Kingdom and Prohibition of conversion remained the same. The civil

code specified imprisonment of three to six years if anyone found guilty on conversion.<sup>15</sup>

After the peace agreement with Maoists in 2006, Nepal promulgated a new constitution for the first time by the constituent assembly in 2015. The new constitution is more progressive than before. It declared Nepal as secular, democratic, socialism-oriented, federal democratic republican state. From the day of promulgation, this constitution faced criticism and applause. Newly introduced "Secularism" became contested one. Hindu activists are protesting the secularism shouting bring back the Hindu kingdom.<sup>16</sup> While minority religious groups put their own note of dissent on the definition of secularism that state has been cited in the constitution.

#### 4.2 Unequal rights, religion, and conflict in Nepal

As the country was adopting one religion one language policy, religious minorities suffered. People of lower caste Hindus were also underprivileged as the state itself was enforcing legal code based on Hinduism and Casteism<sup>17</sup> (Cailmail 2008). The state did not function as an institution protecting people's rights. Rather it stood as a discriminatory institution supporting Hindu belief. Hindu high caste people were the most benefitted groups, lower caste people were marginalized and discriminated (Gaije 2009; NDC 2015; Cailmail 2008). After the 1990s with the arrival of democracy, people of marginalized groups got space to express their dissatisfaction openly. But this constitution did not allow these people to unite and form ethnic or religious parties that prevented them from uniting for political struggle (Gurung and Bhandari 1993). Different ethnic groups, lower caste groups, and religious minorities were

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<sup>15</sup> For detail see, <https://www.churchinnepal.org/page/History-of-Christians-in-Nepal>, retrieved on 10 April 2018.

<sup>16</sup>For detail see; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/5355816.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5355816.stm) ; retrieved on 23 March 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Casteism is one of the features of Hindu culture. Treating a certain group of people as a lower caste, behaving them as a subordinate person and providing fewer opportunities is simply a Casteism in practice.

remained out of the mainstream politics in the Hindu state (ibid). However, there were few parties formed on ethnic line,<sup>18</sup> but the status of these parties has never been strong enough.

These lower caste Hindu people and minority groups were not allowed to go to school and get high-rank office jobs during the undemocratic governance. They are confined to limited resources and choices for their development. The lower caste people were inbounded for dirty works. Consequently, their growth tapered and considered as less competitive. The legacy of marginalization and deprivation of the last two century has made a greater influence on their development indices. There are inequalities among groups based on their social hierarchy (caste) and religions. The Brahmin-Kshatriya (upper caste Hindu), Newar ethnic groups (indigenous from capital city) dominate the highest job levels and acquired good development indices. According to the report of UNDP, Human development index (HDI) of Dalit (lower caste Hindus) and religious minority Muslim is lower than that of other caste people. Their indices are below than average Nepali HDI (UNDP 2009). Income index, educational attainment index, and life expectancy index are also very low among Dalit and Muslim people (ibid).

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<sup>18</sup> However, Nepal Sadbhavana Party, for instance, was created as early as 1985 by Gajendra Narayan Singh, who demanded the autonomy of the Madhesis as well as the recognition of Hindi as a national language, while Gore Bahadur Khapangi founded the Nepal Rastriya Jana Mukti Morcha, the first political party following the Jana Andolan (People's movement) of 1990 and made up of Tibeto-Burmans from the hills (Cailmail 2008).

Table 1 Human Development Index by Caste and Ethnic Groups

S.N.	Caste	HDI	Income index	Educational attainment	Life expectancy index
1	All Nepal	0.509	0.4624	0.421	0.645
2	Brahmins/Kshatriya	0.552	0.5022	0.522	0.633
3	All Dalits	0.424	0.3804	0.292	0.601
4	Newar	0.616	0.5730	0.558	0.717
5	All Janjatis excluding Newar	0.494	0.4410	0.410	0.632
6	Muslim	0.401	0.3648	0.238	0.600

Source: Adapted from UNDP 2009

With the end of the Panchayat system country followed a multi-party democracy system which offered many possibilities for freedom of expression. Several communist parties emerged, that increased people's awareness against superstitious belief associated with religion and culture. These communist parties started to challenge the feudal structure of the state. Communist encouraged people to break traditional beliefs that were limiting people's development and thought.

Though there was significant inequality in society in the past, different ethnic/caste and religious groups had not resorted violence and insurgency (Gurung and Bhandari 1993). But these groups strongly braced Maoists insurgency started in 1996 because of inequality and discrimination (Cailmail 2008). Maoists challenged old values and institutions to break the feudalism. Maoist demanded revolutionary change in Nepali society. The 40 points demands that they submitted to the Nepal government before the start of insurgency included the demand of secular state and abolition of the monarchy. Point number 18 in 40 points demands reads “Nepal should be declared a secular state.” Later, the demand for religious equality strongly came out with the support of Maoists. With the rise of demand of secular state during the insurgency, Christianization got a tremendous boost in Nepal (Cailmail 2008). The strong position of communist after insurgency, especially Maoists helped the suppressed Christianity to flourish in Nepal (Letizia 2017).

Beside secularism, Maoists also demanded social, cultural, and political equality. Maoists brought new hope among religious minority people. Maoists not only raised the issues of religious equality but also equality among Hindu caste groups. Maoists challenged the Hindu caste system that promoted inequality in society. Maoists made century-long marginalized people dream about equality and secular state. Since it gave the commitment of eradicating hierarchy and socio-political chaos, minority groups and lower caste Hindus strongly supported Maoists (Tiwari 2007). To catch the sentiments of these marginalized people Maoists also played a strategic role in different activities. Maoists campaigns included public humiliation and punishment schemes against those who practiced caste, gender and any kind of discrimination (Tiwari 2007; Gradstein and Milanovic 2004). During insurgency in Maoists controlled remote area, they challenged the Hindu state and its law by allowing people of minority religious group<sup>19</sup> to eat cow meat, (cow is a Hindu holy animal and its meat is strictly forbidden in Nepal) (Shah and Pettigrew 2009). That was considered a serious offense against the Hindu religion. With the support of these marginalized people, the Maoists revolution became popular in a short period of time and expanded all over the country.

The Maoist insurgency cost the lives of 16,000 people and wealth of billions of rupees. Maoists insurgency ended in 2006 with signing the compressive peace agreement (CPA). In 2007, The Interim Constitution declared Nepal a secular state, while the first meeting of Constituent Assembly (CA) abolished the monarchy in May 2008. Maoists was a big force to make the country a secular democratic federal republic country by abolishing 200 years old Hindu feudal kingdom. However, Maoists are also blamed for being opportunistic and took advantage of marginalized

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<sup>19</sup> Artisan castes and Magar families started eating cow meat with the support of the Maoist

groups for their own sake (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004) because Maoists did not fulfill all their promise that they had made. Though, Maoists armed conflict was a combined retaliation of people against the marginalization of all kinds.

#### 4.3 Sky-rocketing religious conversion

Once the Hindu kingdom, Nepal has the world's fastest growing Christian population now. Though the constitution is against religious conversion, it is happening rapidly. In a report of 2013, Center for the study of Global Christianity stated that Nepal has the quickest growing Christian population. It predicted that the Christian population will double in size after six and half years.<sup>20</sup> But data of national census did not show sharp increment as claimed by the report. According to the national census, the follower of Christianity has increased in the last 50 years but still holds a small percentage (1.41) of the total populations. The number is still small compared to other religions, Hinduism 81.34% of the population followed by Buddhism (9.04 %), Islam (4.38%), Kirat (3.04 %) (CBS 2014). In 1952/54, Nepal's census showed no Christians in the country. Ten years later, it showed just 458. Twenty years later in 1971, the number rised to 2541, later in 1981 it reached to 3891. The number rises to 31,200, 1,01,976 and 3,75,699 respectively in 1991, 2001 and 2011.

Table 2 Change in the religious population of Nepal

Religion	1952/54		1971		1991		2001		2011	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Hindu	7318392	88.87	10330089	89.39	15996653	80.621	18330121	80.62	21551492	81.34
Buddhist	707104	8.59	866411	7.50	1439142	7.78	2442520	10.74	2396099	9.04
Muslim	208899	2.54	351186	3.04	653218	3.53	954023	4.20	1162370	4.38
Kirat					318389	1.72	818106	3.60	807169	3.04
Jain			5836	0.05	7561	0.04	4108	0.02	3214	0.02
<b>Christian</b>			<b>2541</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>31280</b>	<b>0.17</b>	<b>101976</b>	<b>0.45</b>	<b>375699</b>	<b>1.41</b>
Sikh							5890	0.02	609	0.01

<sup>20</sup> For detail see, <http://therisingnepal.org.np/news/568>; retrieved on 24 February 2019.

Bahai							1211	0.01	1283	0.01
Other	684	0.01			26416	0.14	78994	0.34		
Unstated/ undefined					18138	0.10			61581	0.23
Total population	8235079	100	1155983	100	18491097	100	22736934	100	26494504	99.93

Source: CBS (2014)

Christian activists and leaders have shown strong dissatisfaction about the reliability of the census. Christian leaders are claiming that the number shown on the national census is not an actual representation of the Christian population in Nepal. Referring to Nepalese Christian leaders, a report by the International Institute for Religious Freedom blamed that Christians has been highly manipulated, it wrote that Census in Nepal Marks 2.3 Million Christian as Hindus.<sup>21</sup> C. B. Gahatraj general secretary of the Federation of Nationals Christian Nepal (FNCN) and Dr. K. B. Rokaya general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Nepal accepted the manipulation of Christian populations.<sup>22</sup> The downsizing is not the only concern of Christian but of other religions too. Buddhists also claimed they are less represented, Bhikkhu Ananda, a Buddhist monk, and lecturer in Buddhist studies say the Hindu state grossly underplays the number of Buddhists in Nepal. He denied official 11% and claimed the percentage of Buddhist in Nepal is 50%.<sup>23</sup>

The number of the Christian population has increased substantially and the growth rate of increment has become a serious concern for Hindu activists. There is also a concern of Hindu activists about the way conversion is taking place. There are some thoughts going on Nepali

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<sup>21</sup> For detail see, Census in Nepal Marks 2.3 Million Christian as Hindus, <https://catchthefire.com.au/2013/01/census-in-nepal-reportedly-labels-2-3-million-christians-as-hindus/> Retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018

<sup>22</sup> ibid

<sup>23</sup> For detail see; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/5355816.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5355816.stm); retrieved on 23 March 2019.

society that the conversion is increasing sharply because of tempting activities.<sup>24</sup> It is said that monetary support and donation has made people change their faith.<sup>25</sup> A Nepali newspaper also covered the cases describing how different INGOs and NGOs are spending a large amount of money to attract people to join Christianity, the author of the article also blamed Nepal government for allowing these organizations to work.<sup>26</sup> Christians deny the blame and claim other reasons for the sharp rise of their population.<sup>27</sup> According to the different web portal of Christians of Nepal, the reason behind the sharp increments are as follows;

- a. One reason they gave is a big effort of missionaries. Christians are active in the promotion of religion, they often visit houses with the Gospel of God.
- b. Other reasons they said that due to the restriction on Christianity and Prohibition of conversion, people became stronger and more proved themselves and encouraged community for mass conversion.
- c. The third reason is Nepali mercenaries recruited to abroad security forces like Gurkha Soldiers converted themselves to Christians and influenced their communities back home.
- d. Nepali Christians freely and strongly practiced their faith after Nepal was declared as a secular nation. Before that many Christians were afraid to give their identity as Christian because Nepal was the Hindu nation.

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<sup>24</sup> For detail see; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/aug/15/they-use-money-to-promote-christianity-nepal-battle-for-souls> ; retrieved on 12 March 2019.

<sup>25</sup> During the field visit, Hindu and Muslim referred the same reason for the conversion

<sup>26</sup> For detail see; [https://www.karobardaily.com/news/society/13568?fbclid=IwAR1VdB5MPWttAI186314HmIJB\\_YuFA6WQgpBkMJ\\_iJzUpq7ePn5J-nOyADiA](https://www.karobardaily.com/news/society/13568?fbclid=IwAR1VdB5MPWttAI186314HmIJB_YuFA6WQgpBkMJ_iJzUpq7ePn5J-nOyADiA); retrieved on 26 February 2019.

<sup>27</sup> For detail see, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/2125534/how-christianity-spreading-nepal-despite-conversion-ban>, retrieved on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2018.

There are also different reasons besides these, Hinduism itself is a reason for the rise of Christianity in Nepal. People who felt unprivileged in Hindu society especially ethnic indigenous people and low caste Hindu people are attracted to Christianity (CBS 2012). The Federation of National Christians, Nepal (FNCN) estimated that 60% of all Nepali Christians are from a lower caste who are marginalized and suppressed in Hindu feudal society.<sup>28</sup> Socially and economically excluded groups are revolting against the deep-rooted caste-based system by joining Christianity because Christianity talks about liberation from this injustice.<sup>29</sup>

According to Hinduism, Caste is the result of Karma (doing) of previous life and a person could get higher caste if he had done good works in the previous life. Birth in low caste is perceived as the punishment of previous bad doing. In the past, this caste system was not only limited to the surname or caste but also as their accessibility on education, resources, wellbeing and ultimately position in society. Caste could make an influence on justice and accessibility to different sources in the past. The legacy of previous marginalization and caste discrimination is still making a significant impact on the representation and accessibility of these caste groups. The caste hierarchy is one of the push factors for low caste Hindu people to leave Hinduism while equality and freedom is the pull factor of Christianity. As a result, those who could not challenge the state and social practice are now changing religion as a way out.<sup>30</sup> Much more people from a lower caste and minority ethnic groups joined Christianity (CBS 2012).

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<sup>28</sup> For detail see; <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Christianity-s-rise-tests-Nepal-s-new-secularism>; retrieved on 13 February 2019.

<sup>29</sup> For detail see, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/nepals-new-law-puts-squeeze-on-christians/83153>; retrieved on 2 August 2018.

<sup>30</sup> For detail see; <https://international.la-croix.com/news/caste-away-dalits-seek-escape-through-conversion-in-nepal/9514>; retrieved on 13 March 2019.

## 5. Contestation on secularism of the constitution 2015

Hindus are furious for increased conversion encouraged by secularism, while minority religious groups questioned the definition of secularism in the constitution. Let's discuss how the present constitution defined religious rights and secularism in detail.

This constitution has defined the right of religion in article 26 (Government of Nepal 2015) as follows

- a. "...Every person who has faith in religion shall have the freedom to profess, practice and protect his or her religion according to his or her conviction..."
- b. "...Every religious denomination shall have the right to operate and protect its religious sites and religious *Guthi* (trusts). Provided that nothing shall be deemed to prevent the regulation, by making law, of the operation and protection of religious sites and religious trusts and management of trust properties and land"
- c. "... No person shall, in the exercise of the right conferred by this Article, do, or cause to be done, any act which may be contrary to public health, decency and morality or breach public peace, or convert another person from one religion to another or any act or conduct that may jeopardize other's religion and such an act shall be punishable by law."

Among these three clauses on religious rights, clause c is the most disputed one. Clause c of article 26 of the constitution is clearly indicating that any kind of religious activities pursuing people of other religion is punishable by the law. While in Christianity talking, discussing Jesus and providing information of bible to other people are considered as part of religion. Hence, from the perspective of Christians, the constitution is not securing equality among religious groups. Such kind of jeopardizing of Christianity has been a kind of serious concern for different national and international Christian organizations. The dissatisfaction was raised in UN Human right council, World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) drew the attention of human right council claiming that Nepali constitution does not secure people's right of religion. According to them, the right of freedom and right of expression

is undermined by the constitution.<sup>31</sup> CSW is blaming that Nepal is violating international treaties. Asma Jahangir, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, claimed that conversion ban is against all the international treaties that Nepal has signed to agreed. She added clearly that religious freedom "includes carrying out actions to persuade others to believe in a certain religion". She also points out unclarity about "to convert another person", and this clause could be misused easily to harass religious minorities.<sup>32</sup>

It is also said that clause c gives enough space to control Christianity in the future. News published in Christian Today referring the interview of Elijah Brown chief of staff at the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative<sup>33</sup> wrote that clause c could be used as "groundwork for future restrictions and discrimination".<sup>34</sup> It is said that such biased constitution could result in a situation worse than blasphemy law of Pakistan's,<sup>35</sup> that can be tainted to make a false accusation against anyone else.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately it is blamed that clause c is on set to protect Hindu identity.<sup>37</sup>

Considering restriction on religious conversion, Christians are arguing that if a state is secular in real meaning then there should be religious freedom for conversion also. The religious rights of the Christian group are not supported by the definition of secularism. Debate on the meaning of secularism and rights of religion is going on. Nepali Christians are complaining that prohibition of conversion is not secularism. According to them, there should be full religious freedom if the country is secular in real meaning. Lok Mani Dhakal, President, Janajagan Party Nepal, a Christian party expressed his opinion that secularism "*Dharma Nirpekshtha*" that the state will not favor any one religion. He pointed

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<sup>31</sup> For detail see, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/christians.in.nepal.increasingly.under.threat.as.eight.char.ged.with.trying.to.convert.children/96031.htm>, retrieved on 8th August 2018

<sup>32</sup> For detail see, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/apr/27/christianity-nepal>; retrieved on 28 March 2019.

<sup>33</sup>a religious freedom advocacy group supported by former congressman Frank Wolf. (Wolf serves as a Distinguished Senior Fellow for the organization

<sup>34</sup> For detail see; <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2015/november/why-church-attendance-plunged-nepal-secular-constitution.html> ; retrieved on

<sup>35</sup> In Pakistan, blasphemy law carries a death sentence who insult Islam.

<sup>36</sup> For detail see, <http://www.ucanews.com/news/anti-conversion-law-will-send-nepal-backwards/75477>; retrieved on 2nd November 2018.

<sup>37</sup> For detail see; <https://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/eric-metaxas/christianity-religious-tensions-rise-nepal> ; retrieved on 23 March 2019.

out that clause c is protecting Hinduism and restricting other religions but the protection of one religion by clause c is not real secularism.

While a scholar on the Hindu side argued that Secularism simply means that the state detaches itself from any religious affairs. According to Ritu Raj Subedi, it is a mistake to use secularism as a license for conversion.<sup>38</sup> However, he asserted religious freedom is a requirement for a democratic and multicultural society.

While scholars from both sides refer to equal religious rights as a feature of secularism but they contradict with conversion rights. Hindus are claiming that secularism does not mean religious conversion, but Christians are arguing freely conversion is part of secularism. Understanding of secularism on both sides contradicted, while the definition of the state on secular is a completely new one. It is different from the western model of definition, it describes the protection of the religion handed down from the ancestor as secularism.

Article 4 of the constitution described

"secular means religious, cultural freedoms, including protection of religion, culture handed down from the time immemorial"  
(Nepal Government 2015, article 4).

From the above definition, it is pretty much clear that the practice of religion and culture handed down from ancestors is secularism of the state. It does not say anything about a new religion that is not handed down from ancestors. Hence, Christians are expressing their concern that prohibition on conversion is not only limiting religious freedom but also a violation of human right. Pastor Tanka Subedi expressed his opinion "...This proposal not only bans conversion but also bans the freedom to express and practice what you believe even though you have no intention to convert others," he further said, "it is totally unacceptable and has no respect to another person's freedom and rights."<sup>39</sup>

While clause a of article 26 is also not clear too, it says the right of protection of religion in the constitution allows people to protect the religion but in what sense

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<sup>38</sup> For detail see, <http://therisingnepal.org.np/news/568>; retrieved on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018.

<sup>39</sup> For detail see; <https://www.ucanews.com/news/anti-conversion-law-will-send-nepal-backwards/75477> ; retrieved on 11 February 2019.

protection of religion. Protection from whom? Does it mean people are allowing to protect religion if there is any kind of threat from others? If there is any kind of threat from other religious groups, then one can confront others on the name of defence? In a practical sense at the instance, missionary act of Christianity is perceived as a threat by Hindus. Do Hindus have the right to protect it, then what could be the way for protection? That question obviously could lead very difficult situation among different religious groups in the future.

In the middle of the chaos and contestation, on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2018 state brought Civil and Criminal Codes with strong law against conversion. The law strongly objects the religious conversion as a criminal offense. It stated that anybody who encourages or is involved in religious conversion using any means will be taken under a criminal offense and will imprison for five years plus a penalty of 50 thousand Nepalese rupees. Any foreigner found guilty of encouraging or promoting religious conversions will be deported within a week.<sup>40</sup>

The legal objection for conversion provided space for police actions against Christians in Nepal. There are numerous cases of police actions against Christian people on the charge of conversion or distributing bible. Some incidents are like, A Christian web portal “Christian headlines” covered an incident of forced shut down of a church in Palpa district of Nepal. Where police did not take fair action to solve the problem rather supported Hindu groups to shut down the church. The news explained that Hindu high caste people harassed Christian and forced to shut down the church.<sup>41</sup> Relying on the civil code, the state has taken steps to deport foreigner who were found guilty for conversion. In Gulariya, Bardiya District, authorities arrested Australian citizens, Katiya Graham along with four Nepali Christians on 12th November 2018 for evangelizing. Authorities deported Katiya while other Nepali citizens were released after a few days. On separate incident of Butwal, the western city of Nepal, police arrested four women, including two Japanese on 4th November 2018. They were charged for carrying out forceful conversions. Authorities

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<sup>40</sup> For detail see; <https://www.ucanews.com/news/nepals-new-law-puts-squeeze-on-christians/83153>; retrieved on 4 March 2018.

<sup>41</sup> For detail see; <https://www.christianheadlines.com/blog/church-in-nepal-forced-to-shut-down.html>; retrieved on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

deported these foreigners too. Other two Nepali women were released after a few days.

These are just representative cases that clearly depicts the weak legal status of Christianity in Nepal. The inefficient religious rights and contested secularism have given enough space for any kind of accusation and police actions against Christians. The police actions are also biased and discriminatory it depends upon who is complaining against whom. A case came on the light when police denied registering a case against the prime minister on the similar accusation. An advocate went police office to file a case against prime minister KP Sharma Oli for his participation on Asia Pacific Summit organized by Universal peace federations (a proselytizer organization) on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2018.<sup>42</sup> Prime minister KP Sharma oli was accused of encouraging conversion by participating on the program, where police denied acting unlike other normal cases. These are some illustrative cases that show how the contestation on the secularism has made Christian community helpless in Nepal. If ordinary people were blamed for encouraging conversion in place of the prime minister, then they must go through police actions. Poor and general people are an easy target for police actions. One accusation of conversion could make Christian people face police actions and legal procedure with harassment. Hence, father Silas Bogati, vicar general of the Apostolic Vicariate of Nepal said that Christian community perceived the legal provision on civil code against conversion as "a saw that is always hanging on top of them and can be used any time against them".<sup>43</sup>

## 6. Analysis

### 6.1 What is Secularism for Nepali society?

For academicians and scholars, there is enough space for debate on what is the actual meaning of secularism and what it needs to be done in practice. There are numerous pieces of literatures that explain different ways of defining secularism. Different countries have adopted different definitions and modal of secularism. In the section of the study, we are trying to know people's

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<sup>42</sup> For detail see; <https://nagariknews.nagariknetwork.com/news/63586/?fbclid=IwAR0-YsjkVkPwbuEAgYMbIpObPIQzBPXs-26Y2L8cWCstxK9AdqP41T0qYko>; retrieved on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

<sup>43</sup> For detail see; <https://www.ucanews.com/news/nepals-new-law-puts-squeeze-on-christians/83153>; retrieved on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

understanding of secularism, especially understanding of religious leaders (priest, Imam and fathers) and general people. During the field visit of the site, I found a different understanding of religious figures regarding the secularism.

Interestingly, religious leaders were found less aware of how the constitution has defined secularism, but they knew the country is secular. They want full religious freedom if the country is secular in real meaning. During the interview, Religious leader of Islam at the local mosque (M1)<sup>44</sup> said

"we do not know what is actually written in the constitution, I have not read it personally, but for me, secularism means free for any kinds of religious activities, like Hindus are free for anything"

He further elaborated

"Religious activities supposed to be according to our Quran...for us"

Another Muslim leader of mosque (M2)<sup>45</sup> said,

"If our religion allows anything then the government should not put any law against it...there should be full freedom".

From their perspective, it was clear that anything which is permissible in the religion should be allowed to people. There should be full freedom and no law can interfere in religion. In these interviews, they said they are now as equal as Hindu, which clearly indicated their past underprivileged position.

These Imams did not know how the constitution has defined secularism, but they wanted to have full religious freedom which is the secularism for them. Alike imams, Hindu priests also did not know how the constitution has defined secularism, they have not read the constitution personally. For them, secularism has become a gateway to religious conversion for which they have a strong objection. They argued that more than 80 percent of the population have faith in Hinduism, so the country needs to follow the majority population in a democratic way. A priest<sup>46</sup> (H1) from the local temple said,

"there was no need of secularism, every religion was equal before the secularism as well. There was no restriction for any religions in the past. Islam, Christian, and other religions were enjoying equal rights but why there was a need to declare the

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Imam on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Imam on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Hindu priest on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

country as secular in the constitution, it does not benefit others except conversion".

From these answers, it was clear that the religious leader of Islam and Hindu have not read the constitution personally, but they have their own understanding of secularism. Their source for interpretation of secularism is other people whom they talk, especially family, friends, politicians, and activists. Basically, they were interested in how other religions are enjoying the secularism or misusing the secularism.

While on the Christian side, understanding of secularism is different. People from churches know some theoretical and basic idea of secularism. These Christian leaders claimed that equality from the state and free for religious activities are secular for them. Father of the local church (C1)<sup>47</sup> said that

"Secularism is the separation of the state and religion, while people have full rights of religion, the state treats every religion equally.... Etc., but the declared secularism is not the secularism in real meaning"

Understanding of Christian religious leader (father) is quite a depth than people of other religions (Imams and priests). Somehow their knowledge on religion and secularism has made them eligible to advocate for their religious rights and equality. Different features of secularism are not clear for those religious leaders, but they have a kind of understanding that secularism means freedom for all kind of religious rights.

The understanding of the religious leader (priest, father, and Imam) about secularism and religious rights play a crucial role in society. These leaders make the ultimate effect on people's thought, finally on religious tolerance of society. While the state has not made any effort to make these religious leaders understand different features of secularism. There has not been debate and discussion on how people of each religion could be benefitted from secularism.

The present understanding of the religious leader about secularism is just religious freedom without any boundary, that could not promote equality in

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with father on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

Nepali society. It is time to think, does secularism mean the allowance of full religious activities in Nepal? What if the society is heterogeneous and one's religious rights are incompatible with another people's religion? What if the rule of law overlaps on some issue of religions? What if freedom of choice become offensive to another? These questions need to be answered logically to avoid possible religious conflict.

There is a need for discussion that how people could benefit from the secular state and protect religious harmony. Who will be responsible if there was religious confrontation induced by full religious rights? Is there need of state interference or not? If the state interferes then is it against the notion of secularism or not? Let's take one example of how the full religious freedom could provoke conflict in Nepali society. For instance, some people of Kirat religions (a religion of the indigenous and hill tribe people) and Islam argues that they love to have ox meat, but the present constitution does not allow it.<sup>48</sup>

Hence, it is blamed that the freedom of choice and cultural ceremony is under threat because of the constitution that is protecting Hinduism and cow. These people blamed that protection of cow has threatened the secular status of the country.<sup>49</sup> If cow meat is allowed on the name of secularism, then what could be the response of the Hindu people? Slaughtering cow would be perceived as attack on Hinduism. Hence, if the constitution had not protected cow slaughtering, it could provoke religious violence between Hindu and others. Among the blame and religious harassment, Christianity, Kirat, and Islam are already defamed as cow-eaters. In that sense, what would be the role of the state whether to stay separate from religious affairs or preventing possible violence? What would the secularism mean, allowing cow meat or preventing religious violence? Role of the state to prevent bloodshed violence is more important than freedom of food as part of the religion or ceremony. In different incidents across the country, people were imprisoned on the charge of cow/ox slaughtering for beef.<sup>50</sup> Cow slaughtering issue in India is often more intense than Nepal, Hindus

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<sup>48</sup> Because it belongs to a cow family

<sup>49</sup> For detail see, <https://www.indigenousevoice.com/en/law-banning-cow-slaughter-infringe-indigenous-peoples-rights-in-nepal.html> ; retrieved on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

<sup>50</sup> For detail see; <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/four-held-for-cow-slaughter-in-kapilvastu/> ; retrieved on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

activists became brutal and killed Muslims for cow slaughtering in India.<sup>51</sup> The New York times referring a special report wrote that Muslim in India is being killed for storing beef or transporting cows for slaughter.<sup>52</sup>

Religious leaders who communicate daily with people and talk about religious issues do not know what the best suitable form of the secularism would be. They are not able to answer does a western modal of secularism suits in Nepal or not? What could be the consequences of religious supremacy in heterogeneous societies? These leaders are demanding full religious freedom of their own, they are not thinking of overlapping issues. They are not caring about how their action could affect the whole society and its ultimate consequences that could bring confrontation among different groups.

They only talking about the supremacy of their religions over the state. Does secularism mean it is above the law and order? If the state could not interfere on religious issues, then religion could be discriminatory institutions. Who is the authority to control the bad practices within the religion? In Nepal, there are many immoral practices within religions and culture, such as casteism, witch crafting, dowry system and many more, so there is need of strict laws against these bad practices instituted inside religious affairs. Hence, what would be the role of the secular state in these affairs?

If the state does not interfere on these issues, then how could women feel equality in the discriminatory patriarchy feudal Nepali society. Hence, a question emerges, a state supporting religious reforms for the equality can be secular or not?

Hence, now, it is very unclear in Nepali society about the role of the state and best form of secularism. But it is very clear that the state could not keep itself out of the religious issues in the multi-religious society which is highly prone to conflict. There is a need for state interference to protect the basics of human

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<sup>51</sup> For detail see; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-41966562>; retrieved on 23 November 2018.

<sup>52</sup> For detail see; [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/18/world/asia/india-cow-religious-attacks.html?fbclid=IwAR1VKVIM6K9IMw7bzTIwNXCHlLopcu\\_OJn9AMWbJBkeTysqWEPegBWuUzM](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/18/world/asia/india-cow-religious-attacks.html?fbclid=IwAR1VKVIM6K9IMw7bzTIwNXCHlLopcu_OJn9AMWbJBkeTysqWEPegBWuUzM); retrieved on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

rights of people where religions itself is discriminatory to certain groups of people. Hence, there is a need for debate and discussion on how the rights of religious groups could be kept safe without breaking religious tolerance of society, where others would not feel offended. This should be a basis of secularism of Nepal to settle unequal religious rights and preventing the possible outbreak of religious conflict.

## 6.2 Secularism in practice

Alike the understanding of secularism, practicing secularism is also controversy in Nepal. Some Hindu priests claimed that secularism is against Hinduism. They do not think secularism is for equality, they interpret it as a bad omen for the decay of Hinduism. Hindu priests claimed there was no need for secularism, religious equality was already in Nepali society.

A Hindu priest said, (H2)<sup>53</sup>

“Religions were equal before the secularism, there was no need to make the country secular.”.

Another Hindu priest (H3)<sup>54</sup> blamed secularism came in this country because of corrupt leaders...

"secularism, it was not needed in Nepal. It was brought to make this country Christian. It is not for equality; equality was already there. Our leaders took a big amount of money for that"

But the claim of the priest contradicted with the statement of Imam (M2)<sup>55</sup> said

"it is good at least the country is secular now. It is good to be a Muslim or a secular country than the Muslim of Hindu kingdom, where we used to feel like second-class citizens".

They claimed that the situation in the present is better than the past. Imam (M2) further said

“We can go to court if anything wrong happens because now, we are in the secular state. I think it is better than the previous Hindu kingdom. It is better but not the best”.

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with Hindu priest on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Hindu priest on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Imam on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

Another Imam<sup>56</sup> (M3) disagreed with the previous two, as he desired to have freedom of Islam like in other Muslim countries.

He said

"there is not so much different than the past, still state is prioritizing Hinduism and Hindu people, there are plenty of places we feel unequal. We still have problems on public holidays on our festivals, education system, cemetery and job opportunities etc."

According to them, they are not satisfied with the state for different issues of daily lives as well as religion. According to them, Muslim people do not have enough money to support their local religious institutions. They have poor infrastructures of mosque and madrasa. They also claimed that they are not getting enough support from the government. In comparison to Hindu temples, they are getting nothing.

They claimed that the value of their religious and cultural practices is still meaningless for the state. The state does not give public holiday on their festivals. The state has not recognized their cultural practices and ceremonies.

An imam (M3)<sup>57</sup> said

"there are many things in religion that contradict with the state law, we do not have full religious freedom like other Muslim countries."

They are demanding shariah law as the legal system for Muslims. If the country is secular, then shariah law should have allowed practicing. While Nepal's constitution does not speak about it. Muslim also expressed deep worry on the constitution, they claimed that the constitution has not spoken out any special privileges for the minority Muslim groups, which is marginalized. They are expecting special supports from the state to flourish their culture and religious

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Imam on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Imam on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018

activities. These imams do not think getting support from the state is against the secularism. Imams and Muslim people accepted that they are less benefitted groups from secularism. Referring to flourishing Christianity, Muslim people claimed that present secularism has mostly benefited to Christian groups. While the father of a local church argued all people of each religion could get benefit from secularism not only Christians.

Father of a church (C2)<sup>58</sup> said

"It is better to have country secular. We have freedom than in the past. It is a like breakthrough for equality of rights. It is a continuous process."

Father of two churches (C1, C2) said that though country is secular but there are many things that relate with religion are still not clear. These both leaders gave an example of government unwillingness to give public holiday on Christmas as discriminatory nature of the state. Christmas is not listed as a public holiday by the government of Nepal. On Christmas of 2017, the government had not announced public holiday but after heavy pressure on social media government declared a public holiday one day before Christmas, there was no public holiday for Christmas in 2018. Christmas is a festival of the Christian community, but government unwillingness to announce public holiday on that day is discriminatory. If the state is treating each religion equally, then why there is always confusion for Christmas day. They said that they really felt discriminated.

A Christian man (CM)<sup>59</sup> also pointed out this issue as for discriminatory nature of the state, he said,

" anyone can argue that our religious rights are not fully protected, it's just partial. They did not give a holiday on Christmas, you can imagine the discriminatory nature of the state. It is unsecular. I do not know what happens in the future."

There has been always a doubt on the neutrality of the state and implementation of secularism because of some unsecular activities of the state authorities.

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Father on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2018

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Christian man on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

Father of a local church said (C1)<sup>60</sup>

"state participation on the Hindu festivals, support for Hindu temples are always suspicious to other religion".

Often the head of the state participated in different religious activities of Hindus that has created space for distrust on the secular stance of the state. Different media reported the dissatisfaction of the minority religious groups. Participation of the state authority personnel on Hindu festival not only create fear among the minority but also encourage these minority groups to invite them to their festivals, that is against the secularism.

According to the principle of a secular state, the state is not supposed to participate and provide any kind of support to religious institutions. It cannot give financial support to educational institutions run by religious communities, but the Government of Nepal is providing different kinds of support to religious institutions, trusts, and ceremonies. Father of a local church (C3)<sup>61</sup> questioned why the state is spending a big amount of money on certain religion if a country is secular.

Regarding the support for religious activities, Hindus and Muslims have a different opinion than Christians, they are not questioning the secular stance of the state when the state is providing support to them. Referring to the question of support from the state, Imam (M1)<sup>62</sup> said they are getting support from the state for their religious development, to build a concrete building for madrasa. According to them, in the present context, the Muslim community cannot run their religious institutions, so they need support from the state. They also claimed the support they are getting is very small in comparison to Hindu temples. They still face discriminatory on the amount of support. They are also seeking support from the state to manage graveyard which has become a real problem.

While Christians are found stuck on the western modal of secularism, they want separation of church and the state. They do not want any support from the state.

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with Father on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with father on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Imam on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

Christians are claiming that they are not taking any support from the state, though they also have problems of the graveyard, land for the church and other things. They said they could raise fund among Christian people to manage these things. But Hindus and Muslims blamed that Christian is not taking money from the state because they are getting support from outside, western countries.<sup>63</sup>

Muslim and Hindu still want to get support from the state for their religious activities, they argued that they could not be able to conduct their activities on their own. Muslim people were claiming that they are getting less support, but they want support from the government, they do not care about what secularism says. While Christians are not taking support from the state and they do not expect to receive anything from the state, fully agreed to have a western modal of secularism.

In Nepal, there is a need for religious equality, but equality is not possible without equity in a diverse society. Nepal is a country of more than 80 percent Hindu followers. There is domination of Hindus and Hinduism over others, so the state needs to protect and promote minority religions as well. Small religions like Muslims, Kirat and others always seek some support from the state to perform their activities.

Hindus are claiming that secularism is only beneficial to non-Hindus, especially to Christians. On the interview, Hindu priests claimed that Christianization increased, they are getting big support from outside, they are flourishing with the decay of our Hinduism. For Hindus, secularism is just freely conversion into Christianity, does not imply another feature of it like equality and freedom. They do not think secularism is for religious equality and less connection with the state. A wrong interpretation of the word secularism as "conversion" is widespread among Hindus, has fueled the tension and made people dogmatic against secularism.

A Hindu woman (HW)<sup>64</sup> said

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with Hindu and Muslim people on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with a Hindu women on 13 June 2018.

"religious conversion is one thing that I know these days, it was not like before. People are saying it is happening because of secularism and the new constitution, but I do not know much more about secularism."

Secularism has been interpreted as Religious conversion. so, Hindus want to reverse secularism to protect the number of Hinduism follower, which is decreasing with the rise of Christianity. Hindus are perceiving secularism as the threat to the collapse of their caste hierarchy because of the increasing attraction of lower castes people towards Christianity.

From the above discussion, it is clear that there is a need for dialogue and debate on secularism to ease the situation. Since the state's past legacy with Hinduism and wrong interpretation of secularism have given enough space for distrust for implementation of secularism. Hindus hardliner are taking advantage of contested secularism and provoking people to be hostile to Christians.

Meanwhile, from the site of the state, there are limited, and insignificant actions are taken to address the situation. The state is rather preferring to ignore the situation that has made the environment fertile for religious tension and violence.

### 6.3 Secularism: A source of conflict

Protests and strikes were observed in various parts of the country against promulgated 'secular constitution'. The tension of secularism intensified when Christians demanded the right to convert from one religion to another.

Western countries and Christian missions have been repeatedly condemned as a responsible force to impose secularism in Nepal. The blame also got strength when some diplomats of the western country came on controversy for demanding conversion rights. The British ambassador to Nepal Andrew Sparkes appealed for conversion rights. In his open letter to the Constituent Assembly members, he urged for ensuring the right to conversion.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> For detail see; <http://therisingnepal.org.np/news/568>; retrieved on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2018.

Though conversion is restricted, Christians are increasing sharply. Changing religious population has disturbed Nepali society and culture. The increment of the Christian population and missionary activities have become a serious cause of tension between Christian and Hindus. Hindu activists worried and are blaming that Christian missionary is luring and forcing people to change their religion. A newspaper article written by Ritu Raj Subedi claimed that conversion is a kind of strategy fueled with financial attraction. He explained the reason behind greater effort on conversion is to meet the target of one hundred million Christian follower in Asia by 2025. The author claimed that until certain enticements and inducements are offered to the people, a large scale of conversion is not possible.<sup>66</sup>

The change with the new stance of state on religion has brought several changes in the socio-political dimension of Nepali society. There has been the emergence of hardliners demanding to restore Hinduism. On the other side non-Hindu groups Muslims, Christian, and Buddhist are busy on expanding their previously squeezed religious rights. Hindu hardliners believed that western organizations (NGOs/INGOs) are the main reason behind massive conversions. Western organizations are blamed as the catalyst of conversion by attracting people on the name of humanitarian assistance and livelihood support. Helping on people's health, supporting livelihood and awareness against discriminations are the main theme area of these humanitarian organizations. Though it is not true that all western organizations are supporting conversion, the debate on conversion and activities of the international organizations came on the controversy when some of these claimed humanitarian organizations distributed bible to earthquake victims in 2013. Police took actions against such organizations. For instance, Police arrested seven protestant Christians and a pastor when they distributed Bibles to students at a school in Dolakha, a district in northern Nepal which was hit by the earthquake. Police acted against them with the charge of violation of Article 26, clause c, of the Constitution of Nepal, which prohibits conversion.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>ibid

<sup>67</sup> For detail see; <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Nepali-Christians-arrested-on-proselytising-charges-for-handing-out-Bibles-to-quake-victims-38008.html>, retrieved on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2019.

Referring to the activities of such organization and increasing conversion, an English newspaper the Guardian also claimed that conversion is taking place not just because of faith but also because of motivations that appear to have more to do with health, discrimination, and poverty.<sup>68</sup> These organizations are doing both activities simultaneously supporting victims and letting people know about Christianity.<sup>69</sup> An Italian anthropologist, Diana Riboli, who has spent years researching Chepong shamanism in the area around Manahari said that Christian missions and number of churches sharply increased in earthquake affected area. She noted rise of conflict in the community because of increased conversions in Chepong (an indigenous) communities.<sup>70</sup> Hindu activist blamed that Christian took such an unfortunate incident of the earthquake as an opportunity to extend Christianity in Nepal.

Feelings of hatred and conflict have erupted intensely when these organization provided support to selective Christian families during the crisis. To get support in the crisis, many families joined Christianity. Not only Hindus but also people of minority religious groups took support from these organizations in return they started having faith in Christianity. Often tension arises when these Christian pressures people to join their religion in return of helping them on crisis time.<sup>71</sup> But Christians denied these kinds of allegations. C. B. Gahatraj general secretary the Federation of National Christian Nepal said that people were not being forced to convert to other religions.<sup>72</sup>

An active Christian woman (CW)<sup>73</sup> said they (Christians) do not give or receive money to people for the conversion. She said they are just helping people who are really in need. She mentioned that they help people who are in need, they do not give money, they support the Christian families on the education of children

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<sup>68</sup> For detail see; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/aug/15/they-use-money-to-promote-christianity-nepal-battle-for-souls>; retrieved on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2018.

<sup>69</sup>For detail see; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/apr/27/christianity-nepal>; retrieved on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018

<sup>70</sup> For detail see; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/aug/15/they-use-money-to-promote-christianity-nepal-battle-for-souls>; retrieved on 21 March 2018.

<sup>71</sup> For detail see; <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/2125534/how-christianity-spreading-nepal-despite-conversion-ban>; retrieved on 13 August 2018.

<sup>72</sup> For detail see; <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/asia-pacific/protests-in-nepal-to-get-word-secular-cut-from-constitution-1.2307691>; retrieved on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Christian woman on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

and improving livelihoods. They also mentioned that kind of humanitarian assistance is not only for the Christian people but for other religion too.

Another Christian Man (CM)<sup>74</sup> said,

"we help who are connected with our church, we also like to help who are not connected, but if we go other people's door then Hindu activists assume that we are attracting the family, so we are confined within our members".

In such a tensed situation, it is also very difficult for these organization to support their fellow people too. If these Christian organizations support to the non-Christian families, then it would be blamed that Christian are luring the family for conversion. If they only approach to Christian, then it would be selective and biased support. Hence in each way, these missionary's organization are blamed for fueling tensions.

A Hindu priest (H2)<sup>75</sup> at the local temple blame that, Christians are trying to increase their number by erasing Hinduism. They are disturbing society. They are giving money and other support to people for changing religion. They are buying people's religion. Strengthening Christianity in Nepal is perceived as a challenge to Hinduism hence often Hindu activists treat Christians as an offender.

In some places, these tensions turned into violence. Tanka Subedi, a Kathmandu pastor accepted that there could be cases of violence between Christians and Hindu activists. He further said that the churches in Nepal ask its fellowman to visit other people and tell about Jesus. There are many incidents of attack on Christian people while they visit people's door with the gospel.

In some cases, with allegations of conversion Christian are taken into custody.<sup>76</sup> For instance, an incident in Kathmandu valley, around 40 church leaders and members were arrested for the charge of forcibly converting Hindus on June

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Christian woman on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Hindu priest on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>76</sup> A Christian Social worker Chinimaya Blown was accused by police of collecting Hindu children from remote areas of the Himalayan nation to put her children's home and then forcing them to take part in Christian prayer services. For detail see, <http://www.ucanindia.in/news/nepalese-christian-jailed-over-religious-conversion/32617/daily>

13<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Those arrested were released on the same day, but 8 leaders were freed on 15<sup>th</sup> because of pressure from furious Hindu demanding strong actions.<sup>77</sup>

Some radicalized Hindu groups are involved in attacking Christians. Nepal Defense Army, a fundamentalist armed group killed a Roman Catholic priest in 2008. Same group bombed two churches in September 2015 and killed three and injured fourteen.<sup>78</sup>

Fundamentalists groups like Nepal Defence Army are still a big threat for minority groups as well as the secular stance of the state. Hatred feeling and speeches against Christianity has been intense, arguments of radical groups are clearly pointing potential socio-religious conflict. BBC news reported an incident where a Hindu youth participating at a protest said that

"In secularism, it will be very difficult for them (non-Hindus) ... Churches will be destroyed, Mosques will be destroyed... people who are very much [of a] religious mind, they will spontaneously blow up these churches and mosques. The fight between religious communities... is not going to stop. It has been ignited".<sup>79</sup>

People who are involved in Hindu radical groups are those who are most aggressive towards Christianity, frequent attack on Christian people and humiliating speeches against them seriously raise the question of security of Christian people in secular Nepal. BBC news reported an incident of attack on pastor family by Hindu activist, it explained that a member of Hindu nationalist party always offensive against a Christian and their family. These Hindu activists are announcing for the start of the religious war.<sup>80</sup>

While the anti-secular and Hindu nationalist associations emphasized Sanatan Dharma (Hinduism as a transcendent, 'eternal religion') as a shared Nepali (and

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<sup>77</sup> For detail see; <https://solidaritypersecutedchurch.org/news/hindus-pressure-police-to-arrest-40-christians-in-nepal/>; retrieved on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2019.

<sup>78</sup> For detail see; <https://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/eric-metaxas/christianity-religious-tensions-rise-nepal> ; retrieved on 23 March 2019.

<sup>79</sup> For detail see; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/5355816.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5355816.stm); retrieved on 23 March 2019.

<sup>80</sup> For detail see; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/5355816.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5355816.stm); retrieved on 23 March 2019.

South Asian) heritage (Letizia 2017), so they must stand to protect it. Such a feeling to protect the religion and fear of losing identity have provoked Hindu sentiments and nationalism. Hindu people are polarizing against Christianity and secularism. Hindu activities are increasing in Nepal, they are interpreting secularism as a threat that will erase Hindu identity.

Referring a threat from secularism, a Hindu priest (H2)<sup>81</sup> said

"before secularism Christian were on slow pace, they used to feel shy or afraid of coming in front l. But now, they are coming door to door. If we ask something, they reply they do have equal rights as we have. They talk about legal things. It seems they are coming with well prepared. Christianity is strengthening in the loss of Hinduism, we are losing people. If they continued like this Hinduism will be finished, we must protect it and save it, it is our duty and responsibility".

While the case of Muslim and Christians is different, the tension between Muslim and Christianity is not intense like between Hindu and Christians. Muslims said they do not have any kind of confrontations with Christians yet.

An Imam (M1) said<sup>82</sup>

"Christians do not come to our doorsteps with the gospel. We do not change our religion like Hindus are doing. If a Muslim changes his/her religion, then it would be very difficult for them. We are a little bit strict on our religion, if Christians tried to change our people then it will be very hostile situations. I hope that would not happen".

From the interview it was clear that Muslims are not liberal for any kind of religious interference from the Christian side, they do not accept any Christians visitor at their door steps. There are no incidents of tension between Muslim and Christian yet that does not mean they do not have conflict. Muslim are more united and cautious about the Christian movement near their area and settlement. In an interview, Imam said (M2)<sup>83</sup> that they are keeping close eyes to their people as well as Christians nearby. He also emphasized that a true Muslim is hard as a rock so Christians could not shake our faith on Allah.

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with Hindu priest on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Imam on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Imam on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

Now, Muslim are cautious with Christians activities, but they fear with Hindu fundamentalists. Muslims fear of a clash with Hindu activists in the secular state because of the growth of Hindu nationalism. The finding of the research contradicted with presumption guided by a news article published in 2010, which had claimed that Muslims were supportive to Hindu state because of fear of conversion in a secular state. After secularism, Hindus has become more hostile and aggressive. Hindu hardliners are mobilizing people and organizing different religious activities. Religious leaders are giving controversial speeches against other religions. These Nepali Hindu activists and organizations have increased their collaboration with their Indian part. Indian Hindu hardliners are offensive to Muslim, so the increasing effect of their collaboration could exaggerate the tension in Nepal too. Referring to the sensitivity on religious issues ex-president of Nepal Dr. Ram Baran Yadav urged the government to take necessary actions to prevent the country from possible religious conflict.<sup>84</sup>

A Muslim man (MM)<sup>85</sup> in an interview said,

"we do have often problems with hardliner Hindus, who are influenced by Indian sites."

Imam of the local madrasa said (M1)<sup>86</sup>

"We had a few years back religious violence with Hindu people. We do not have problems with Hindus of hill origin but Hindus of Terai or Indian origin are offensive against us."

These statements clearly show rising conflicting scenario and the concern of security of minority religious groups in secular Nepal. The increased threat could affect their religious activities and the right to perform. Although the constitution secured the right of religion and claimed to be secular, minority groups have doubt on the implementation. Taking advantage of pronounced secularism missionary international organizations are distributing bible on the shadow of humanitarian assistance. That has become counterproductive to the

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<sup>84</sup> For detail see;

<https://nagariknews.nagariknetwork.com/news/64152/?fbclid=IwAR0wLHowxyZKJvLU9shM055kYIDpg-OuUCyG7mw0G-cqJYHZUnxGf5ejjw>; retrieved on 12 March 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Muslim man on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Imam on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

situation which is getting worse with insufficient action from government and rise of Hindu nationalism.

#### 6.4 Hindu religious leaders and religious tensions

Hindu religious leaders are often come on the controversy by making speeches against other religions and secularism. They blamed the government for forgetting religious and cultural heritage. These leaders trying to provoke people against secularism. They are doing different kinds of religious ceremonies to make people worry about Hinduism. They depict scenario as losing religious ground in front of western culture and religion. These leaders not only limited to their controversial speeches often they also come with some heinous plans to fuel religious conflict. It is one of the incidents that is worthy to discuss here. Early in the morning of April 8, 2018, Nepalis media reported a shooting incident happened at Biratnagar, the eastern city of Nepal. Acharya Srinivas, a Hindu guru was shot by unknown and injured badly. The news of bullet fire spread like wildfire across the country. According to police, there were three shots fired at him. Following the incident, a rumor came out that he was shot because of his stand for Hindu country. He is one of the active Hindu gurus speaking for Hindu kingdom. Some activists also claimed that he was threatened by some people for that cause. The shooting incident was condemned as a serious offense against Hindus and Hinduism. Many Hindu activists started to raise Hindu slogans after the incident. Hindu activists provoked people to unite and stand against other religions. Acharya Srinivas participated in different political affairs advocating for Hindu country. He has a good connection with the palace, ex-ministers, and high-profile people. Just a few days ago ex-king went to meet him.

After a few days, police came with a shocking investigation result. Police did not find any kind of threat calls.<sup>87</sup> At last, police presented 4 people on the case of the shooting. Three were his own follower and one was Srinivas himself. According to police, Srinivas himself was mastermind for shooting case. Police revealed that he had asked his fellowman to shoot him. According to police, the plan was made with the mission to create religious tension. They planned to portray the shooting incident to make Hindu people fear and unite against

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<sup>87</sup> For detail see; <http://everestdainik.com/2018/04/172545/?fbclid=IwAR1cu6R1H-ILUK29stDhufYRCsPzxuyrunHm5NJdH1ciLeN5MhzUjh4vIvI>; retrieved on 14 March 2019.

secularism. Other three people confessed that it was the plan of Acharya Srinivas and they followed his order for the sake of Hindu kingdom.<sup>88</sup>

### 6.5 Hinduism: a growing political agenda

During the Maoist insurgency “secularism” was agenda of Maoists but after declaring secularism “Hinduism” has become a political agenda of other parties. Nowadays, Nepalese media are reporting different news on religious issues. Prominent leaders of different parties are rethinking about the religious status of the state. Noncommunist parties are raising the issue of Hinduism, especially Nepali Congress and Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP).<sup>89</sup> planning to take Hinduism as their agenda. Some prominent leaders of Nepali Congress are arguing to make Hinduism as their party agenda and get ballots of majority Hindus. These leaders are sensibly picking the religious issue because people are much more furious on declaring secular. 'Nepal as a Hindu State' was one of the most recommended suggestions received by the Suggestion Collection Committee but that was not heard.

Politically minority groups that are calling and supporting for secularism are very low in number. They are not a beneficial group of people for political parties, especially not for the ballot. Trying to attract people's attention by voicing against the secular stance of the state has become a political strategy. These parties supported secularism during the promulgation of the constitution as a safe side, at that time they fear of being monarchists if they stand against secularism (Cailmail 2008).

On the election of the house of representative held on November and December 2017, communist parties got the historical victory. Communist parties have taken the government with a two-thirds majority. Now, Leaders of noncommunist parties as an opponent in parliament are using anti-secularism agenda against communists. These parties are arguing that secularism was introduced without people's desire in a nondemocratic way.<sup>90</sup> Hence, some

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<sup>88</sup> For detail see,

[https://shukrabar.nagariknetwork.com/news/3934?fbclid=IwAR3RZzJ4y5nVb6iQGixhKWS\\_bbbjcuQB6YhSZo5nvxdi33gYg0JrRtpDI](https://shukrabar.nagariknetwork.com/news/3934?fbclid=IwAR3RZzJ4y5nVb6iQGixhKWS_bbbjcuQB6YhSZo5nvxdi33gYg0JrRtpDI); retrieved on 10 March 2019.

<sup>89</sup> The Nepali Congress who had long dominated Nepali politics but lost its strength in the recent election, supported secularism in 2007 but now prominent leaders of the party want to make Hinduism as party agenda.

<sup>90</sup> For detail see; <http://therisingnepal.org.np/news/568>; retrieved on 14<sup>th</sup> Jan 2018.

leaders are asking for a referendum where majority Hindus would vote for their cause. Reversing Hindu country could restore their party strength in Nepali politics. Referring secularism, these leaders are blaming communists as traitors. They are convincing people to support them to save the religion and nation. Hence those parties who lost election are claiming that the agenda of the secular state is a western issue brought by communists, especially Maoist. But in fact, the demand of the secular state had emerged before the Maoists insurgency. A Buddhist monk Theravada in the 1990s demanded secularism for equal recognition, rights, and space for all minority religions in the country (Letizia 2017). The demand could not meet because the constitution of the 1990s announced the country as a Hindu kingdom.

Except for Nepali Congress, Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) of different factions are also against secular Nepal. Rashtriya Prajatantra Party -Nepal (RPP-N) headed by Mr. Kamal Thapa stood as a major exceptional party to oppose secularism in Nepal. Rashtriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal supported both a constitutional monarchy and Hinduism, became the fourth largest party in constitutional assembly election of 2008. It got a significant number of votes in the proportional part of the election with the Hindu agenda.

Parties are seeking for the sentimental issue to get people's support. Hindu population holds more than 80 percent hence their vote with religious sentiments could be one of the strong points to these parties to improve their positions. While Communist leaders claimed secularism is the greatest achievement of the minority groups, hence people should protect it. Once, prime minister participated in the festival of minorities and stated that no one could get back from secularism. He emphasized that it is a great achievement after the centuries-long struggle.<sup>91</sup> These communist parties emphasized freedom and equality in a secular country. While Non-communist leaders spoke out against religious conversion in a secular country. They appealed people to protect culture and religion handed down from ancestors, they also asked to stand

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<sup>91</sup> For detail see; [https://www.nayapatrikadaily.com/news-details/1638/2018-12-30?fbclid=IwAR0oLooB20tocDGkYf33mzNhBG\\_3K1qd16MwbFTD0KI6CKuXvha97IXUIN4](https://www.nayapatrikadaily.com/news-details/1638/2018-12-30?fbclid=IwAR0oLooB20tocDGkYf33mzNhBG_3K1qd16MwbFTD0KI6CKuXvha97IXUIN4); retrieved on 12 March 2019.

against conversion induced by secularism.<sup>92</sup> Non-communist leaders argued for religious equality, freedom, and tolerance, but they are against secularism and conversion. While communist leaders emphasized equality and freedom, according to them only secularism could open door of religious equality. Non-communist leaders blamed communist leaders for supporting Christianity and conversions.<sup>93</sup>

Different minority groups fear the rise of Hindu nationalism in politics. Leaders who are trying to use religious issues for their own political interest could fuel the tension for their vested interest.

A Christian man (CM 2)<sup>94</sup> said that

“we fear that in future there could be chances of a clash if leaders provoke the Hindu activists.”

Controversial speech of the leaders on secularism and Christianity has created an insecure environment for minority groups.

A Muslim man (M2)<sup>95</sup> told

"we feel insecure when leaders give the controversial speech on religion and trigger Hindu people to unite, now leaders of some parties are threatening to reverse Hinduism as the state religion, such leaders are trying to create tension"

A Muslim youth (MY)<sup>96</sup> express his opinion that minority Muslim got fear when there is rally or march of some Hindu activist or organizations, he said,

"we fear when there is some religious march of Hindu groups like Shivsena or something, we also fear if there is a religious clash in the border area of India that could easily come into Nepal."

The fear of these people is genuine because those leaders have a strong linkage with Hindu organizations in India which show solidarity to reverse Nepal as a

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<sup>92</sup> For detail see;

[https://nagariknews.nagariknetwork.com/news/65549/?fbclid=IwAR2sdYSoaQ9jZdhoIpy0Msj\\_bjWCXFzDlnJZMolz2\\_3T6U-IQRCyKnTcPK8](https://nagariknews.nagariknetwork.com/news/65549/?fbclid=IwAR2sdYSoaQ9jZdhoIpy0Msj_bjWCXFzDlnJZMolz2_3T6U-IQRCyKnTcPK8); retrieved on 11 March 2019.

<sup>93</sup> For detail see;

[https://nagariknews.nagariknetwork.com/news/65015/?fbclid=IwAR3fEMruVIWBAGWfcLCr\\_tsg-bXomKBZgKEa01e3reeVGI1zPRv3x9KmjS9E](https://nagariknews.nagariknetwork.com/news/65015/?fbclid=IwAR3fEMruVIWBAGWfcLCr_tsg-bXomKBZgKEa01e3reeVGI1zPRv3x9KmjS9E) retrieved on 9 March 2019.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Christian man 2 on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Muslim man 2 on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Muslim youth on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

Hindu country. Among them, The World Hindu Federation (WHF) and the Shiv Sena are prominent. They had a strong role in Nepalese politics. In 1990, after the first people's movement, WHF, and Shiv Sena had stood against the secularization of the state (Cailmail 2008). Member of WHF blamed secularization of Nepal as the conspiracy of the outsider against Hindu religion. The international president of the WHF, Ashok Singhal, blamed the Western and some other Muslim countries playing a game to turn a Hindu kingdom into a secular republic. He said, "Nepal became a secular state under the pressure of China, US, Europe, and some Muslim countries." The Indian site WHF is very hostile against Muslims. Ashok Singhal is the one who was leading Ayodhya campaign in India and one of key players to the demolition of Babri mosque.<sup>97</sup> So, hostility against Muslims could easily be carried to Nepal by their collaboration partners any time.

There is also a rumor that Nepal became secular because of money provided by western church and countries. During an interview head of the RPP-Nepal explained that secularization in Nepal is a conspiracy of the westerners. Kamal Thapa said that major political parties had received a large amount of money for that cause.<sup>98</sup> Though there is no proof of these claims, it is a widespread fact among Nepali people what they are believing is true.

Another reason for the politicization of secularism is because of the monarchy. In Hinduism king is the reincarnation of Lord Bishnu so religious people could not imagine going against monarchy or against his lord Bishnu. With the sentiments, some pro king leaders arguing to reverse the country into Hinduism that is how it would be easier to restore the monarchy. Pro-monarchs are arguing revival of the Hindu kingdom will end the present crisis and restore unity among religious groups. Hence, we can understand the reason behind the unsupportive role of Monarchy for secularism in Nepal, in fact, secularism and monarchy could not come together in Nepal.

Monarchy never supported Christianity neither in the past nor in present. At the past, Christianity was overshadowed because of palace and king. According to

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<sup>97</sup> For detail see; [https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2018/12/05/babri-demolition-from-lk-advani-to-bal-thackeray-here-are-the-key-players\\_a\\_23607892/](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2018/12/05/babri-demolition-from-lk-advani-to-bal-thackeray-here-are-the-key-players_a_23607892/); retrieved on 15 March 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Tough Talk: Kamal Thapa with Dil Bhushan Pathak, Kantipur TV

some Christian web pages, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, there was the presence of Christianity in Nepal. There were some Christian people in Kathmandu valley before it annexed to modern Nepal. The source claimed that a Jesuit priest Father Cabral was the first known Christian visited Nepal in 1628. He had permission from the King to preach Christianity in Kathmandu valley. Some Capuchin monks were permitted to stay but once Mallas were conquered by Shah in 1769 all Christians were expelled out of the country. The loss of Kathmandu valley in the war ended nearly half decades of Christian history in Nepal.<sup>99</sup> It is said that during the unification of Nepal, king of Kathmandu sought help from East India Company against king Prithvi Narayan Shah. Capuchins were suspected as mediators in the scheme. As a result, Christianity has been perceived as not only religion but also as an outsider, westerner things that would weaken country and attack on the sovereignty of the state (Letizia 2017). The country still carries the same image of Christianity as western things and detrimental to Nepal.

Pro-monarchy leaders are always busy on involving religious activities and giving a speech to unite Hindu people all over the world. These leaders are seeking help from the Indian government. Indian political parties, especially Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) supports Hindu nationalism in Nepal, hence anti-secular forces have grown stronger in Nepal after the victory of BJP in 2014. Leaders from Indian parties are asking Nepali leaders to reverse country. Even these Indian leaders did not hesitate to give controversy speech on the secular stance of Nepal.<sup>100</sup> Even the BJP itself claimed that secular Nepal could be a security threat to India and its relation would be affected if Nepal remains secular.<sup>101</sup> The in-depth Indian desire to reverse Hinduism in Nepal was surfaced when Indian prime minister Narendra Modi asked Nepali prime minister to re-declare Nepal 'a Hindu state'.<sup>102</sup> Based on that we can imagine the importance of Hinduism in Nepal for Indian site. During the promulgation of the

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<sup>99</sup> For detail see; <https://www.churchinnepal.org/page/History-of-Christians-in-Nepal>; retrieved on 1 June 2018.

<sup>100</sup> When Nepal set out clearly on the secular path after the election in April 2008, the BJP expressed its disillusionment through Jaswant Singh, former BJP External Affairs Minister of India: "As an Indian and a believer in Sanatan dharma [Hinduism], I feel diminished. There is nothing more secular than Sanatan dharma. This is a negative development" in Nepal (Cailmail 2008).

<sup>101</sup> For detail see; <https://www.hindujagruti.org/news/4503.html>; retrieved on 9th December, 2018.

<sup>102</sup> For detail see; <http://www.southasia.com.au/2016/02/25/re-delcare-nepal-hindu-state-modi-told-oli-reports/>; retrieved on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2018.

constitution, Nepal faced a very hard time and pressure from India, Indian envoy visited Nepal just a week before the promulgation and had returned displeased. Consequently, Nepal faced six months of economic blockade from India for going against Indian will to declare Nepal a secular country.<sup>103</sup> They are strongly advocating to take the country back to Hindu, so they do not want to lose their supportive country with same religion. Hence, Sen, (1992, 14) said that in many respects, Nepal is, to this day, the guardian or "the warehouse of Indian civilization" and India does not want to lose it. So, secularism is not only the internal agenda of Nepal, it is also an issue for Indian site to throw back from Nepal.

Hence, the above discussion concludes that in present days, Hinduism is a strong political agenda creating fear to minority groups and largely supported by different religious organizations and Indian site. It will be seen how Nepal will handle religious turmoil and neighboring pressure.

## 7. Conclusion

The state has put one step forward to end inequality and discrimination with the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015. Secularism was one of the greatest achievements of minority religious groups who were suffering from religious discriminations. Globally the concept of secularism is contested so as it happened in Nepal too. It ended two hundred years two-century-long Hindu dominance. Besides that, it became disputed not only because of the new idea but also because of less effort of the state to make it clear and understandable to people. As the first time introduced to people, secularism is misinformed and misinterpreted, ultimately became contested. From the above discussion, it was clear that unclarity about the secularism and misleading information in the air has tensed the situation. People are less aware of the different feature of secularism; religious conversion has been interpreted as the main feature of secularism. While aggressive missionary activities also strengthen the misinterpretation.

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<sup>103</sup> For detail see; [https://www.bbc.com/nepali/news-46588605?fbclid=IwAR2v8g0-ConvvicMOq478nRqnlAgRKtxpJ-OcpOIZ8hOsR\\_1OPz4CWR7Ug](https://www.bbc.com/nepali/news-46588605?fbclid=IwAR2v8g0-ConvvicMOq478nRqnlAgRKtxpJ-OcpOIZ8hOsR_1OPz4CWR7Ug); retrieved on 22 February 2019.

Different religious leaders with the capacity to influence religious followers themselves have not read the constitution and do not have enough information about secularism. Their dependency on secondary sources provoking religious tension. People of each religion are only concerned about the religious freedom of their own. None of the sides care about religious harmony. Each started feeling insecure about others' freedom. Strengthening of one religion has seen a threat by others. In the heterogeneous society like Nepal, there are plenty of spaces where full religious freedom of one could easily become a threat to others.

There are some grievances and some dissatisfaction among all religious groups. In such a scenario, the role of the state to address the rising dissatisfaction is essential. There is a need for interreligious dialogue that could prevent outsider's play and keep the harmony safe. Politicians are playing with religious sentiments for their own vested interest not for the equality and freedom of people. There is a need for action from state to ease the situation because conflict spreading now is more political and less religious. Some leaders are trapped in Indian pressure because of the weak diplomatic stance of the country and their leadership.

There are many positive aspects of Nepali secularism. State interference in the religious matter is somehow essential for basic human rights of people. Some religious practices deny the persons' basic human rights, like witch crafting, untouchability, male dominance. Where the state needs to step in to prevent such bad practices. Nepali society is patriarchy and feudal where women are graded as second class, in this case, gender equality could not be achieved if the state stays away from religious affairs. Hence, a secular state could intervene in any religious affairs to protect the basic rights of its people.

Nepali secularism deals not only with the religious freedom of individuals but also with the religious freedom of minority communities. The state must play a role to end the religious domination of Hinduism, furthermore, it also needs to support minority religious groups to flourish. Hence, separation of the state and religion could not promote equality among groups in Nepali society. There is no definitive model of secularism. Hence, Nepal needs to be alert while designing

its own model of secularism, for which there is a need for collaboration and cooperation among religious groups. Unfortunately, there is a complete lack of communication among religious groups. Different religious leaders are not taking initiative to settle down the problem, rather they are trying to misuse the tensions for their own cause. Leaders like Srinivas are a serious threat to religious tolerance. Hence, the state needs to take actions to foil the strategy where minority religion could be the easy target of Hindu fundamentalists. The state should guarantee its equality to each religious group because neutrality is not possible at least at this moment in Nepal.

The meaning of secularism could be contested but the state needs to guarantee basic human rights, rights of religion, equality and freedom which are a minimum requirement for democracy as well as secularism of the state. The idea of peaceful existence of diverse groups should be one of the important features of Nepali secularism.

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## Appendix: Interview questions

**(This is a tentative list; the sequence of questionnaire or questions could be different relying on interviewee answer)**

### **1. Understanding of constitution and secularism?**

- a. What do you think about the recent constitution?
- b. Do you find any differences between the recent constitution and previous one?

### **2. Good things? Or bad things of the constitution**

- a. What are goods and what are bads on the constitution? (this question will be asked to know how interviewee has perceived secularism, has he/she perceived as negative or positive.)

### **3. View on constitution**

- a. How do you know about secularism? Do you read constitution personally?
- b. What is secularism in his/her view?
- c. Is it necessary for Nepal? Importance of secularism?
- d. What is the benefit of the secularism? In your view?
- e. What is the difference before and after the declaration of secularism?

### **4. How they perceive their condition being a follower of the certain religious group?**

- a. What is the benefit of being Hindus/Muslims/Christians/Kirat/Buddhist? In past/in present?
- b. What is the bad of being of Hindus/ Muslims/Christians/Kirat/Buddhist? In past and present?
- c. How would they like to tackle bad things? (importance of dialogue)

### **5. Feelings of suppressed or privileged?**

- a. How was/are the interreligious group relations before/ after declaring secularism?
  - i. *Cases of good relation*
  - ii. *Clashing cases*
- b. How has secularism affected other religious groups?
  - i. *What do Christian think about religious rights of Hindus (Buddhist/Kirat/Islam) after secularism (this question will focus to know their view about others condition, will be asked differently with different people)*

- c. How do other religious groups respond to one's religious activities? (to know obstacles from other groups while carrying one's religious activities/or potential clash condition)
- 6. What are the practical implications of the new constitution on people's lives? from the perspective of religious leaders?**
- a. Are there good things?
  - b. How is the interreligious group relation after secularism?
  - c. Are there any problems on daily lives?
    - i. Funeral, festival, ceremonies?
    - ii. How they solve these problems? (mechanism, process, and access)
- 7. What are the practical implications of the secularism on people's lives? (people's view)**
- a. Are there good things?
  - b. How is the interreligious group relation after secularism?
    - i. Do you have interreligious friends? Relatives?
  - c. Are there any problems on daily lives? How they solve it?
    - i. Funeral, festival, ceremonies?
- 8. What do you suggest solving the problems? (if any?)**
- a. Should the state be secular? Or not Do you think reverting Hinduism solve the problems and secure religious rights?
  - b. Do you think interreligious dialogue would be the best option to solve the problem or not?