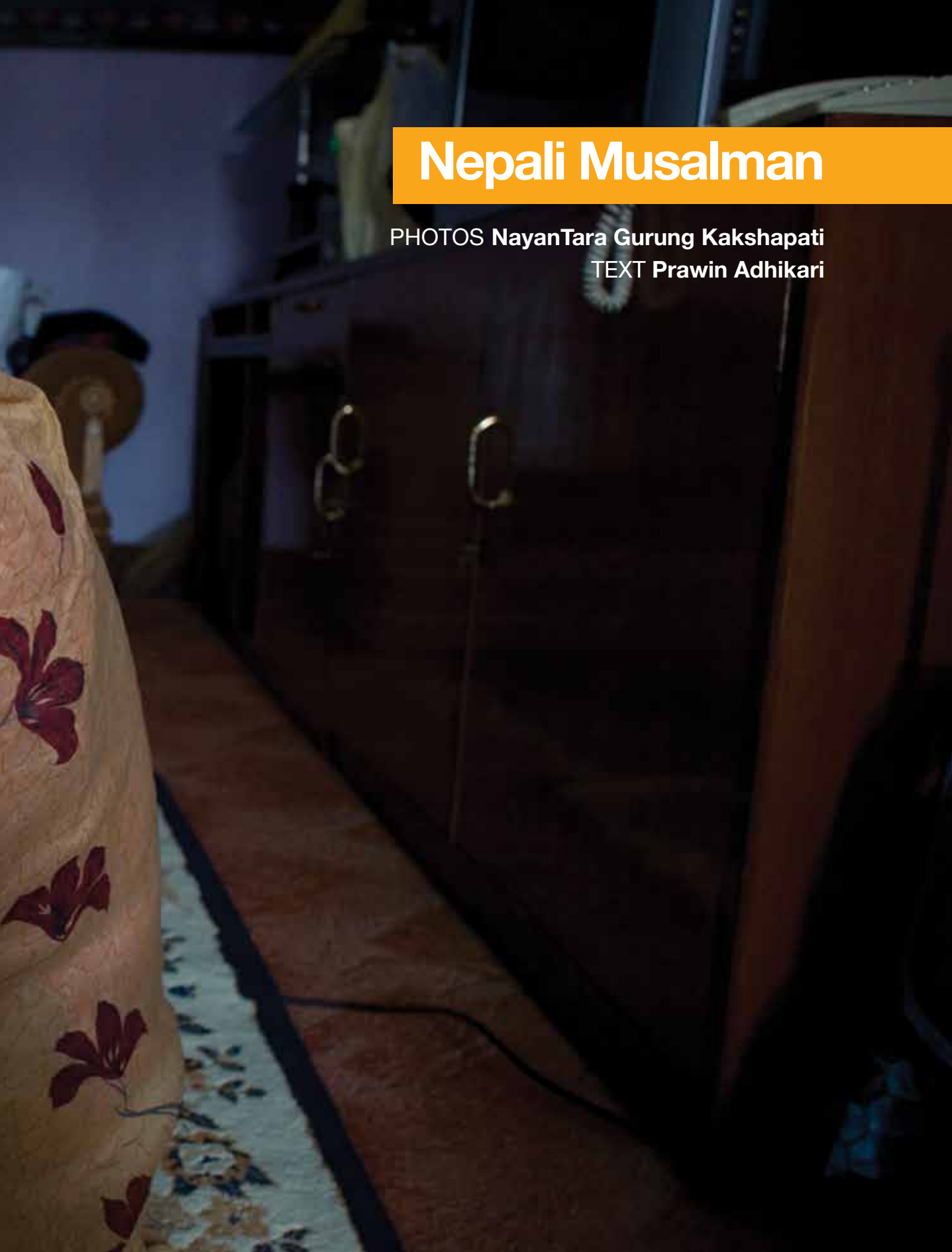




Nepali Musalman

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Nusrat Banu and her sisters had many Newar friends with whom they played as children in the alleyways of Old Kathmandu, ranging afar to the mustard and radish fields, bantering in Newari outside their home and, once inside, returning to the unique Urdu of the Kashmiri Muslims of Nepal. As a child she was aware of the differences between the communities, but that never precluded friendship. And so it continues to this day: Nusrat's maid of thirty-odd years, Laxmi, talks with her exclusively in Newari. **With her sisters and children she switches fluidly between Newari and Urdu: her Nepali has a Newari accent but the Urdu sounds very much like Nepali.**

But the divisions of faith and community were always sharp: Newars didn't eat what Muslims cooked, and Muslims didn't eat what Newars cooked. Wedding feasts were prepared separately. For a wedding in a Newar friend's family, Muslims took Newar porters to the market, bought enough provisions to impress a boisterous clan, and sent them over with the porters. Of course, the best of friends sat together to eat, but that was rare, and even more rare was the exchange or sharing of cooked food. Merchants of either community borrowed and lent money, but did not break bread together. This was a finely balanced stance between two communities that respected each other, needed each other, and quietly existed alongside each other without the commingling of blood.

Newar women worked the fields alongside their men, or visited temples bedecked in finery, but Muslim women submitted to the rules of their faith confined themselves to chores within the home, like working on bead necklaces or embroidery, making their contribution to their families' busy shops. **They travelled in the dead of night to get from one home to another, or took covered palanquins through circuitous routes designed to avoid men.** Even today, although the children grow up in freedom, once they are of the age to choose, they are expected to choose the strict rules of the faith rather than the illusion of freedom from community and ritual.

The Muslim community in Nepal was very tightly knit, especially because of the preference for marriage between cousins. Nusrat grew up in a house owned by the community's mosque: her mother's side of the family were rich tradesmen while her father was a scholar. Perhaps as a result of this schism between the material and spiritual worlds, her brother Maqbul Shah rebelled in a big way by joining the Communist Movement in Nepal very early on. Consequently, he was sent to prison, where he completed his Bachelor's degree. In those days, Nusrat, from a family that was traditionally loyal to the monarchy, acted as a conspirator with her brother and his idealistic, headstrong bunch of friends.

'Every few days, I took a few young kids and carried food for him to Nakkhu Jail. Of course, his communist friends all shared it. On the way out, they gave me letters to carry out of the jail because the police wouldn't search me. I carried so many love letters Man Mohan wrote to Sadhana *didi*. That is how they fell in love.

'Even many years later they would come home to eat, sometimes evading police in the





night. They would find me on my way to the school, give me a few rupees to buy vegetables, and say – “*Bahini*, we will come in the evening to eat at Maqbul’s home.” My mother would get angry. How much could that money buy? But they loved her food, so they came, hiding from the police. Even my son Nakim’s friends call him and ask if they can come to eat here.’

Nusrat lives with her husband in a house in Bag Bazaar. Nusrat’s husband Zamir, his forehead bearing the mark of the pious, is jovial, loving and well respected in the community as a student and scholar of the faith. Her daughter Talat Shah is adding floors to her house behind Nusrat’s. Her grandchildren, Mohib and Aashma, born and raised next door, have spent most of their lives in her care. Nakim’s family lives in its own home, but Nakim visits often. But this is just a count of her immediate family – her kin are numerous and scattered over Kathmandu. Nusrat’s constant companion in her old age is her elder sister Sahera Banu, who fusses over her even now, taking over in the kitchen, taking over conversations to better explain Nusrat’s comments, because she still thinks Nusrat didn’t play quite enough with her Newar and Nepali friends.

Mohib, Nusrat’s grandson, unwittingly equivocates when asked about his experience as a Kashmiri Muslim of Kathmandu. Well, most friends don’t know much, but those who know know it very well, he says. Traffic police take a look at the driving license and nod with recognition: Kashmiri Muslims aren’t mistaken for the thin sliver of other Muslim populations in the valley: Muslims who fled Tibet with the Dalai Lama, Hindustani Muslims, Pathans, Somalis. If he is thin, people think he is a Brahmin, Mohib says, but otherwise people guess he is a Kashmiri Muslim. Mohib explains: long ago, when Islam came to the valleys of Kashmir, two sons of a father chose between separate faiths, one remaining a Kashmiri Pundit Brahmin, and the other choosing to submit to the true faith as received and preached by the Holy Prophet. It is a neat and necessary trick, cultural and psychic, necessary to navigate through a complex Venn diagram of identities, between being identified and ignored. It has helped the Kashmiri Muslims of Kathmandu survive and prosper as Nepalis, a thin but illuminated line in the intricate tapestry of Nepali national identity.

An apocryphal story in South Asia is retold by Kathmandu’s old Muslims: ‘O King! Let us live among your subjects as honey hides in milk.’ This ethos holds yet among the Kashmiri Muslims, inconspicuous in their long heritage save for the twin mosques near Rani Pokhari and their crowd of the pious on Friday mornings. Whereas the histories of our neighbouring countries are stained by violence brought between religious communities, that horror has left Nepal relatively untouched.

That changed – and with what violence! – one morning late in August 2004, when the Army of Ansar al-Sunna in Iraq ritually beheaded one and shot dead eleven more Nepali migrant workers. Overnight, Kathmandu erupted into vengeful hate. The worst desecration

of a Muslim place of worship yet in the nation's history took place. A mob burned the mosque. Men climbed atop the mosque's dome to defile the building, egged on by thousands of their compatriots. The mosque's Holy Koran was torn to pieces and scattered on the street.

Elsewhere, mobs went around town on a targeted rampage. The Bismillah 786 blessing identifying Muslim homes and businesses became a token inviting wanton violence. Families barricaded themselves, sometimes inside bathrooms, as mobs first systematically looted the houses, then set everything on fire. The government watched idly, castrated into inaction.

'Nakim phoned and said – should we come for you? Jamim also called. What would we tell them? Our lives are at risk, so come and risk your life too? We watched helplessly. They burned everything, everything. Bricks were littered all over the house. I wondered if I would live or die.'

Yet, even in a moment of such monstrous betrayal by the nation, the community didn't abandon the Muslims of Kathmandu. 'It felt very bad, very frightening to see how easily everything could be lost. Newars, Nepalis, Musalman – we all went to gather the pages of the Holy Koran. A mob came to a Muslim's house, but the Newars who lived behind their house came and drove the mob away, saying the house belonged to them, that they had rented it out to Muslims.'

Nusrat knows about the incident in Iraq, but doesn't understand how that should lead to retributions in Kathmandu. How did the Muslims of this valley, a people not separate but integral, accrue the blame for the gruesome death of fellow Nepalis? The Army of Ansar al-Sunna justified its action by accusing the murdered dozen of being idolaters, worshippers of a false prophet named Buddha. Nusrat has a different take on Buddhists, one that is no doubt the result of centuries of tolerant co-existence of the communities: 'Our Holy Book says there have been thousands of prophets before the Holy Prophet who was the last messenger. Perhaps Buddha was one, a thousand years before Rasool Pak. Who is to say what Allah decreed or did not? Buddha never called himself God – people after him did.'

So it is a tip-toeing dance around sacred limits on either side: tolerating a people that are essentially idolaters in their eyes, a people that bow down to the myriad gods and goddesses and elders, and asking in return the seclusion that makes it possible to protect a way of life rapidly becoming incongruent to the changes around them. There is no laity in this community: all is piety, and that determines how one conducts business or how one eats in the company of others, or, indeed, how one doesn't. The butchers must read their *namaz* devoutly, or the taste of the goats they halal will not be worth the walk to their shop. Usury is forbidden, so lending and borrowing become theological conundrums. The vegetables are bought from farmers known to use unclean methods for cultivation. Life is a constant test, a long set of tribulations designed by the only designer.

Life continues, with its series of births and celebrations, its increase of family and the





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Nusrat Banu & her
elder sister Ayeshah Banu
1970's.

Ayeshah Banu & her two
sons - Jamim Shah & →
Masud Shah - 1980's.



↙
Nusrat Banu and
husband Zamir Uddin
1980's.



↗
Nusrat's eldest daughter
Talak gets married - 1981



← Nusrat with her eldest grandchild Ashma - 1988

Ashma grows up to be a young beauty!
(2000) →



← Nusrat with elder sister Sahera Bano bathing Ashma's first son - Marouf. (2003)



contingent loads of happiness and sorrow. Allah and his gift of life have been generous to Nusrat: her family has multiplied and is knit ever closer. Her children are doing well: Nakim is a well-established name in his profession, and Talat is a happy grandmother herself. She has been able to fulfill her duties to Allah and the charity he demands towards the poor. Her sister Sahera Banu is by her side, spending long mornings in the kitchen cooking up tasty meals. There isn't much want, and life, now rounded and free, is rewarded, resplendent.

Most time is spent around the smaller pleasures of life: mostly cooking with Sahera Banu, who now shares her time with all the households in the family. Between the morning and noon recitations of the *namaz* prayers, Nusrat cooks or supervises the cooking of most of the food for the day. It is a time filled with domestic mirth and the languid enjoyment of the transient: conversations touch upon the past, the present, the vegetables, or the plans for festivals approaching. Nusrat points out each ingredient for the day's meals, but also insists upon the minute divergences from the practices of the Newars or other Nepalis in the way something is cut or cooked. Or not cut, for that matter: leafy greens are torn from their stems rather than cut, and cooked in a pressure cooker until the plentiful oil, now a vivid red from the copious amounts of dry chilli fried in it, separates and pools around the base. These are the details in which the differences are accounted.

'I was too young to remember anything,' says Nusrat of the times of the Rana prime ministers. That was a different world, the strands of everyday life delicately pulled from a timeless web, where change always conflicted with belief, and therefore nothing changed but the days, nothing aged but the body. Everything is a rapid fast-forward these days, like TV, which takes up entire days sometimes with its torrents of melodrama. Of course, as long as the firmaments stand, Allah's will is for all people to be pious, and so Nusrat expects that her grandchildren – and with Aashma's child, her great-grandchildren – will continue to be pious Muslims.

– 'Kashmiri Muslims?'

'Nepali Muslims. We have been here for so many centuries. Now we call ourselves Nepali Muslims.' ©