

# **Changing Course: Nation Above Notion**

## **Abolition of Federalism by Restructuring and Strengthening Local Bodies**

### **Referendum on Secularism**

(Presented for Discussion and Debate)

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## **Appeal**

Working as a political journalist for two decades and travelling extensively during elections or other times in the past four years since I joined politics, I have had the opportunity to interact with a large swathe of Nepalis from different walks of life in cities and villages. I have noticed a huge difference between how a certain class of Nepalis including those from Kathmandu understand, perceive and peddle the idea of Nepal and how Nepalis from villages, townships and hamlets understand, experience and desire Nepal.

Weighing those diverse viewpoints, I cannot help noticing clear signals of ongoing irreparable damage to Nepal's independence, integrity, sovereignty as well as ethnic, religious and cultural harmony in recent years. Hence, my soul as witness, national interest in my heart, and the nation foremost in my mind, I have put forth this document on "Changing Course" for discussion and debate. We can build Nepal, if and only if Nepal can survive. If Nepal remains Nepal only in name, then what is the point?

If things remain the same, the country will be forced to crawl again in the same manner for decades to come. And, especially, it will be the youths, who have already suffered for decades, will be forced to suffer again. Let's not assume that the country is not in crisis. There are countries in the world which have descended into deadly conflict and violence and whose existence have been threatened within a short span of time.

Immediately upon reading the title of this document, I am sure one section of the society will hit me back hard with numerous epithets: regressive, reactionary, feudal, rightist, anti-people and so on. They will also throw accusations that I do not understand progress, do not embrace change, I am politically naïve, do not understand Nepali society and its structural problems, and I wish to fish in troubled waters etc. There will also be others who will claim that a hypocrite has been unmasked. They will also share "I told you so" phrases etc.

Before throwing these words and phrases, I appeal to you to at least read this document once, which has been prepared by exercising the rights gifted by democracy and the

Constitution of Nepal 2015, and where I have presented my opinion peacefully and with the commitment to abide by the same constitution. I will, of course, respect the fair criticisms that will follow thereafter.

## **Abolition of Federalism**

### **by Restructuring and Strengthening Local Bodies**

Out of over 200 countries in the world, around 30 have one or the other form of federalism. Those states that are federal had adopted the system decades ago in response to their ground situation. Constitutional expert Dr Bhimarjun Acharya, who has done extensive research on federalism, states in his book *Kaanoon Ra Raajnit* (Law and Politics) that the development of federalism has basically been guided by three objectives. First, to bring together scattered states to build a stronger nation such as in the United States of America and Germany. Second, to stop states from seceding such as in Canada or Brazil. Third, in the course of realizing freedom from colonization such as in India and Austria.

He further writes that the experiences of four countries – Ethiopia, Sudan, Belgium and Nigeria -- that transformed from unitary to federal model have not been pleasant. We should also not forget how the powerful federal countries like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia disintegrated subsequently. He has mentioned about Cameroon and Uganda, the countries which have reverted back to unitary state after fiddling with federalism.

Even in these early years, there is no lack of experts and common Nepalis who believe that federalism is ill-suited to Nepal from political, economic or geo-political point of view. Even numerous leaders and people who had supported federalism before the promulgation of the constitution have started turning critical having seen how this system has ended up transferring the Singhdurbar-centered corruption to every nook and corner of the country; how it has unnecessarily added the number of people's representatives and staffs; how it has flourished chaos; and how it has added the unbearable financial burden on the country. They are starting to believe that in the long run, it can create questions on the integrity of the country itself.

It was claimed that federalism would address discriminations created by the unitary state, and would empower the local people. But it has neither effectively empowered the local bodies nor it has addressed the aspirations for development and prosperity.

### **a) Source of additional corruption and financial burden**

In a diverse country like Nepal, one key basis of the federal system of governance is the "identity" of its communities. It is to respectfully address their religious, cultural and developmental aspirations. However, except for some, it was the conclusion of the general public and the Constituent Assembly that Nepal's federalism cannot be constructed on the basis of "identity". Another major basis for federalism is "capacity." But Nepal could not follow the basis of capacity while delineating the federal map of the country.

Had they followed the basis of capacity, they would have had to delineate the country in the model that was prescribed decades ago by eminent geographer Dr. Harka Bahadur Gurung – resembling the same model of five development regions each touching north-south borders. When they tried to mix both capacity and identity, they ended up with a situation where no one is satisfied including those that developed the current model.

On top of this already disappointing start, the fact that the federalism promoted additional financial burden, corruption and inefficiency meant that the ordinary Nepalis became naturally and increasingly disenchanted with the system itself.

If we talk about fiscal year 2078/79 (2021/22) nearly 24 percent of the total national budget has been allocated for local and province levels. Let us discuss the provinces first. There are many experts who have said that the tier of the province itself has become meaningless and has only sought to add expenditure. In fact, most of the legislative and executive rights granted by the constitution to the provinces can be directly granted to the local bodies. It can have an immediate salutary effect – with the revocation of positions of 540 province assembly members, province chiefs, chief ministers, dozens of province ministers, province planning commissions, province civil service commissions and many

other agencies. Likewise, there is a lot of room in restructuring and further strengthening the existing local bodies.

There are 753 local levels in the country. The Local Level Number and Delineation Commission headed by former secretary Balananda Poudel had previously suggested that their maximum number could be 565. It could have been further reduced, according to many experts. But due to vested political interests, the number was increased to 753 instead. For instance, there are 18 municipalities within the Kathmandu Valley alone. They can all be brought under a single municipality. There are Wards to deliver service at community level.

Similarly, there are over 6,743 wards in the country. Each of these wards has ward chairperson and four other members. During the Panchayat regime, people's representatives used to be volunteers and did not draw salaries. After 1990, too, the local representatives did not get salaries. However, today the members of provincial assemblies, House of Representatives and National Assembly are given salaries. The Supreme Court delivered a verdict stating that other people's representatives cannot get salary. But to make up for the absence of salary, the local representatives are provided with lots of service benefits and allowances. In some places, one can see them taking 14 different kinds of service-benefits. The number of people's representatives who receive such benefits is more than 34,000. In fact, local representatives should be volunteers. This is how it goes in most countries in the world.

The report by the Auditor General points out that the most corruption takes place at the local level. Apart from corruption that is largely invisible, there are instances of blatant corruption at local level and no one has been able to control it. For example, tens of thousands of local representatives are also the owners of dozers and trucks. Neither they nor the leadership at central level are bothered about conflict of interest, which is a critical precondition for good governance. The representatives must be free from any conflict of interest. Otherwise, one cannot expect to control corruption.

If federalism is abolished and the local bodies restructured and strengthened, and if additional measures are taken as per experts' advice to reduce expenditures, many economists predict that out of the total 24 percent of national budget allocated to local and provincial levels, at least 10 percent can be saved. The remaining 14 percent probably will be required to meet the capital or development expenditures.

Presently, around 7 percent of the total budget is allocated for the health sector. That, too, after the increment due to the coronavirus pandemic. Otherwise, it was limited to around 4-5 percent. Likewise, around 10 percent of the total budget is allocated for education. Free and quality public education and health are basic human rights and there can be no compromise on their delivery. The resources that can be saved by abolishing federalism can be provided to education and health – 5 percent each. That can bring about a truly dramatic improvement in the situation of infrastructure and standard of health and education from the present sorry state.

However, my primary concern against federalism is borne not out of economic but out of concerns for national security and integrity.

## **b) Fatal for territorial integrity**

As discussed above, various proponents and critics of federalism in Nepal made their analysis from the perspective of its necessity or non-necessity based on "capacity" and "identity". However, our primary concern should have been guided by the potential of this system to ruin our country's independence and territorial integrity in the long run. Many may feel this as an overblown concern. I hope I am wrong. But hope is not a strategy.

Third world countries including Nepal have a common serious problem. We unknowingly become accustomed to perceive our important social, political and economic issues from Western eyes. Our opinions are made up accordingly. We are made to travel to Europe and America to understand democracy. We are made to participate in workshops on democracy. Thanks to weakness in our educational and academic history, the books on

democracy that we read are largely written by Westerners. Our opinions about our own history from the time of Rana regime are thus built upon those manufactured perceptions.

The situation is similar regarding our perception of communism, as well. The documents written by Marx, Lenin and Mao, and the organized trips to Russia and China, meant that they made up their minds about the fantasy of communism, which is still entrenched in Nepali politics.

The same thing happened in the course of establishing federalism. It was a totally new concept for Nepal. Whatever our leaders and others had understood about federalism was based on documents written by foreigners, especially Westerners. Leaders were taken on visits to Switzerland to showcase the excellence of federalism. Enchanted by the Swiss federalism, the leaders quickly concluded that federalism was necessary to develop Nepal like Switzerland. All those people who had read some of those documents, who had visited Switzerland and seen the exercise of federalism in some other countries overnight became strong proponents of the system in Nepal.

The winds of federalism that came from across the southern border to the southern plains of Nepal quickly swept the entire country including Kathmandu valley to such an extent that anyone who criticized federalism was immediately labeled "regressive." Only a few could pluck any courage to write or speak against it. Their voices were drowned out in the thunder of federalism.

Federalism is not a problem in principle. Although only around two-and-a-half-dozen countries in the world have adopted federalism, some of them have gone on to achieve fantastic progress and development. But any principle or knowledge has to be grounded in time, circumstances, geography, geopolitics, history, culture, society and the level of consciousness in that society. Otherwise, they cannot function well. Any move to forcefully implement such an idea will not give the desired result. Instead it might unleash division and conflict in society. Nepal was not ready for federalism from any point of view

be it time, circumstance, geography, geopolitics, history, culture, society or its level of consciousness.

Our geopolitical situation poses the deadliest danger. In this context, let us first discuss the structure of federalism in Nepal. The federalism in Nepal will not be limited to the present structure. There will come a time of such a crisis that demands for multinational states will be raised in the first phase. A multinational state is a country which contains one or more ethnic groups, as identified by religion, language, or colour and where different communities are provided rights and treated as separate "nations." Recently, when Rajendra Mahato was appointed deputy prime minister he declared to start a "freedom movement for the multinational state." There are many other leaders who have raised similar voices.

Once the demand for the multinational state is achieved, the second phase will be unleashed when another crisis will be used to raise the demands for federalism with the right to self-determination, ostensibly "to address the concerns of historically marginalized and oppressed" communities. There have already been murmurs about such demands. And it is already seen to be able to provoke certain sections of society. Even though the right to self-determination may not be immediately fulfilled, there are examples in the world where they have been fulfilled eventually. In Nepal, we simply cannot take such risks.

Any movement for the right to self-determination in Terai will have immense long term Indian strategic implications. That importance is also linked with the rivers that flow into India from Terai. It is appropriate to discuss it further.

It is natural that in an unstable, undeveloped, weak country like Nepal, which is sandwiched between two big powerful countries, there will be attempts at intervention by world powers. Power play is something that has been witnessed constantly in international politics and diplomacy. It depends on us how much we can safeguard ourselves from the scourge of such tendencies. Whether such interventions are within

acceptable limits or whether they turn into daily brazen exercise like now will ultimately shape our country's international stature, dignity and integrity.

Our two neighbours India and China are becoming the centers of the world in terms of economic, military, and strategic might. China has a population of 1.4 billion and so has India. They have their own interests with regards to Nepal. China does not want to see increased Indian or Western influence in Nepal. Basically, it is concerned about Tibet. India, on the other hand, does not want to see increased Chinese influence in Nepal. Historically, India considers itself as the “big brotherly guardian” of Nepal. It cannot tolerate Nepal spinning away from its national interest. Its interests in Nepal are linked with multiple concerns such as water, land, economy, society, security etc.

Out of them, its primary concern is related to water. Tens of millions of hectares of Indian land suffer from shortage of water during dry season and from inundation in wet season. That problem can be further complicated in the days to come and can impact the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people. In order to address these problems, India has launched a highly ambitious, one of the biggest infrastructure projects in the world, known as River-Linking Project. The rivers flowing to India from Terai region of Nepal will have utmost importance in the proposed project. Around 60 percent of water in Ganges River flows from rivers from Nepal.

In order to realize the river-linking project, India will need to undertake vast projects to control and regulate the water flow from Nepal. It will be in the interest of India to establish huge reservoirs and dams in the Nepali territory. Similar structures will have to be built on the Indian side as well. Such structures will result in droughts as well as inundations in Nepali territory. Some examples can already be seen. India will find it further appropriate to build river-linking canals for the project in Nepali Terai region. Hence, Terai has immense strategic importance for India.

India is our neighbour. We must respect her. We must understand her sensitivities. India must already be frustrated by the attitudes of Nepali leaders who not only seek

scholarship opportunities for their children but also support to reach power; and then start criticizing India once they are out of power. We will reach nowhere by raising slogans of hollow nationalism. But we must remain cognizant of our long-term national interest.

When issues of deliberate demographic aggression by India in the context of strategic importance of Terai are raised, we repeatedly get to hear one refrain: “that India itself is developing so rapidly, why would its citizens want to come to a poor country like Nepal? Why is Nepal worried?” The logic sounds reasonable. But if any state or its intelligence agency wishes to insert, say, one million of its population and seek its political windfall 25 years down the line, such logics of rich and poor will no longer hold water.

The population of Nepal is around 30 million. The population of India is 1.4 billion. India is 22 times larger than Nepal. Even if the entire population of Nepal enters into India, it will not feel a thing. But if one million Indians are pushed into Nepal as per a well-designed plan, within, say, 15 to 25 years, it can bring about dramatic changes in the demographic structure. In the long term, this can allow Indians to make or unmake governments of their choice in the region. It can have a huge impact on the lives of millions of Madhesis and others who have dwelled in that region for a long time.

This can sound like a hugely exaggerated statement. But one has to take such extreme situations, too, into consideration while formulating one's strategy for national security. Otherwise, India ought not to have been worried when Nepal constructed Kodari highway linking with Chinese border, or when constructing two-lane Banepa-Bardibas BP highway. But it did worry. India was never happy about Kodari highway. And it compelled Nepal to limit the BP highway into a single-lane road. Basically, Indian expectation is that during times of crisis, Chinese forces should not be able to easily travel up to Indian border. Hence, when talking about national security, one has to even consider what might look like overblown possibilities down the line. For a country in a sensitive situation from a security perspective, the national security agenda must always trump considerations for development and prosperity.

It was not for nothing that BP Koirala returned home from exile in India in 1977 by raising the banner of national reconciliation. When weighing his own political interest with patriotism and national security, perhaps he could not reject two facts. First, it was no more possible for him to continue launching the struggle for democracy in Nepal from Indian soil without turning into a puppet of the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who had just recently declared emergency in India. It was already a suffocating prospect for him. Second, he had closely watched how India merged then independent country Sikkim into its union. In both of these instances he could not only see the hands of the "visible" Indian government but also the "invisible" Indian intelligence.

BP was not naïve to the fact that after Sikkim, Indira Gandhi was now eyeing the Terai region of Nepal. But BP would never compromise with Nepal's sovereignty and integrity. As a result, there was a widening rift between the two. In a book published in 2014 called "Mission R&AW" by a former officer of India's external intelligence agency R&AW, RK Yadav confirms that after the merger of Sikkim, India's attention was diverted towards the Terai region of Nepal. He says that the mastermind of Sikkim merger and the founder of R&AW, RN Kao himself had devised a strategy to take over Terai.

After the merger of Sikkim in 1975, Indira Gandhi declared the state of emergency in India. Quoting Kao, Yadav goes on to write in the book, "Merger of Tarai of Nepal was deferred in view of political turmoil in India when Indira Gandhi declared emergency in the country in June 1975 just after merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union. ... Unfortunately, when elections were held in 1977, Indira Gandhi was defeated and her party did not come to power and Kao's operation of merging Tarai and other assignments did not materialize." This makes it clear that Indian interest in Terai is nothing new.

The only difference is that from the perspective of both security and water, the strategic importance of the Terai region has continuously grown for India. In this context, what would be more suitable for India – the federalism with right to self-determination or the federalism with the present central dominance? The answer is clear. The first and direct

painful consequence of any Indian move designed to split Terai will have to be borne by Nepalis in Madhes. Alongside, it will unleash unimaginable harm to the entire country.

The reason for discussing all these things is not to demonize India or spread malafide information against India. But the fact remains that just like India is the top priority for Indians, Nepal is also the top priority for Nepalis. If we do not speak about our national interest, who else will? We have reached this point due to attempts by foreigners to guide our national interest. If we do not become alert even now, there is only an abyss ahead.

Amid these complications in our relations with India, we need to not only resort to India-bashing but work constructively to find a balance where we can assure India about their security and water interests to an extent without harming our own national interests. We will reach nowhere if we continue in the present path where leaders bash India when in opposition and then make about-turn when in power; when they forge one or other kinds of compromises for their personal or vested factional interests. India's bureaucracy and agencies are several times more capable and professional than ours. Let's not forget that.

### **c) Another tool to erode key institutions**

It is natural for powerful countries to employ various strategies to fulfill their national interests in neighbouring countries. One of the strategies they employ is to effect a gradual erosion of authority of the country's key institutions and turn them into a "client-state." India found monarchy as the biggest obstacle in its designs on Nepal. The role of India on the erosion of the power of monarchy in Nepal was gradual, continuous and decisive.

Just like monarchies in other countries, the monarchy in Nepal, too, had committed mistakes. We get to hear or read about them from time to time. But it is true that the Kings had never stooped so low to harm the self-respect of the country compared to the present stock of our political leaders. In many critical junctures, Nepal's monarchy had stood up as the obstacle against foreign machinations.

When in 1990, the people's movement reached its climax, then King Birendra rejected a draft proposal put forward by India on March 31, 1990 to accept almost-total Indian dominance on military, economic and water resources of Nepal. Had he accepted the proposal, India would have lifted the trade and transit blockade against Nepal, returned life to normalcy and helped prolong the life of the Panchayati system but as analysts say that would have jeopardized the sovereignty of Nepal. King Birendra chose to bow down before his own people instead and restored democracy. Likewise, in 2008, then King Gyanendra chose to abdicate the throne and "bow down to Nepali people" instead of accepting Indian proposal for installing "baby King."

There are many such instances linked with King Mahendra. After the exposure of the Kalapani-Limpiadora dispute, many accused that the Indian seizure of the land was the result of King Mahendra's lack of action. But they conveniently forget how King Mahendra had displayed exemplary political acumen in episodes after episodes to safeguard Nepal's nationalism, independence and self-respect during those times when Nepal faced an even more difficult geopolitical and economic situation.

It was King Mahendra who forced India to withdraw its security check-posts from 17 points in Nepal's northern border. It would have been an impossible feat for today's leaders. Moreover, he stopped the usage of Indian currency and Indian textbooks in Nepal. Despite Indian protests, he went ahead and opened a land border link with China through Kodari highway. He brought to an end the practice of Indian ambassadors being present in the cabinet meetings of Nepal. These were extraordinarily courageous moves in those times.

If the subsequent leaders of Nepal had been able to do even a fraction of what King Mahendra did in favor of national unity, independence, foreign relations, protection and development of culture-religion, and development, the face of our country would have been much different. But all of his patriotic acts were overshadowed because he hijacked democracy. It is due to such patriotic acts of the Kings that when in 2007 Nepali Congress abandoned its long-held agenda of constitutional monarchy, its towering leader Krishna

Prasad Bhattarai, whose morality and capacity is incomparable to present leaders, decided to walk out from the party that he helped build through years of his blood, sweat and toil.

BP Koirala was continuously politically harassed by the Kings but he continued to say that “King and his [democracy's] necks were joined” till his last breath. Alas, there are no longer such leaders of high integrity, faith and patriotism. Patriotism has been converted into power-politics, and it looks like they have handed over the keys of power to the foreign embassy.

Things have come to such a pass that foreign ambassadors feel no qualms in violating basic diplomatic protocols by meeting our current and former prime ministers wearing slippers, or making them wait in a queue in hotels, or walking up to the prime minister's residence at midnight to threaten the prime minister. During complicated political events, Nepali leaders brazenly ask for support from foreign embassies. Ambassadors make calls to the houses of leaders. People are helpless. It is already late to understand how Nepal's nationalism has fallen into crisis.

Some will say that changes of both 1990 and 2015 were because of Nepalis themselves. Some leaders were even under the illusion that they were the ones who imposed border blockade in 2015. But make no mistake that the blockade was in place only up to the point when India so desired. Once India decided, the blockade not only got lifted but some Nepalis realized that “blockade in reality was not imposed by us” after they received a beating across the border. It is now well known that the leaders of Maoists who proudly claim to have carried out the “great” Maoist movement had spent eight-and-a-half out of 10 years of their armed insurgency living in India. Does anybody still think that the Indian state or its intelligence was unaware about them during those eight-and-a-half years when they unleashed violence in Nepal? It does not mean that the people of Nepal had no role to play in the changes. It only means that the key to the change was in Delhi.

After a long and gradual attempt, the most powerful institution of Nepal's sovereignty was toppled. The subsequent institutions of the President, Prime Minister, bureaucracy, police, and constitutional organs have all suffered huge erosion in their professional capacity, power and public trust. The institution of the President is considered to be the promoter of national unity and the protector of the constitution, hence should have been above politics. Unfortunately, even in that institution, very few people have any faith.

Similarly, the entire judiciary, including the Supreme Court, has been equally politicised and there are lots of doubts about their ability to impart independent justice. The ruling and former prime ministers themselves have raised questions repeatedly regarding the independence of the Supreme Court. During the hearing of the case of parliament dissolution, senior advocate Tikaram Bhattarai observed thus: "I am ashamed to see how the judiciary that had stood strong even during monarchy and Panchayat has so weakened during the republic." However, the Supreme Court did receive a generous admiration for restoring the parliament both the times when KP Oli dissolved it.

In order to further erode and harm the institutions of Nepal and to further demoralize Nepalis who are already frustrated by what they are witnessing about their institutions, the "great" design of federalism was foisted on us. Nepalis were brainwashed into thinking that federalism was the magic bullet to address the perennial situation of under-development of their country. Nobody bothered to look at the level of civilization of citizens of Switzerland, their level of consciousness, their level of integrity and good governance, their history, geopolitics and geography. They only looked at how Switzerland progressed by adopting federalism, and the extraordinary peace and prosperity they were enjoying.

Top Nepali leaders were trying to impose federalism in a country whose prime minister had chosen to fly in a commercial airline during his official visit overseas instead of national flag carrier out of vested business interests, and where a tourism minister was killed when a private aircraft he was travelling in met with an accident, while he was supposed to use the government aircraft. And where the government named the airport after the same tourism minister and the same businessman. Federalism was being

imposed in a country where foreigners decided who would be ministers and prime ministers and for what duration. It would be easier to control a society immersed in immorality, inefficiency, incapacity and corruption by creating political divisions.

On the one hand, we had leaders who never felt an iota of shame for subjecting the country to decades of moral and financial corruption, and rather took pride in rushing towards foreign embassies in broad daylight soliciting their help in favor of personal or partisan interests. On the other hand, we have leaders who have brazenly cozy relations with India and who have no morality and who lecture us not only on federalism but also on the need to entrench it with concepts of multinational state and right to self-determination. It is a different matter that their demands were not addressed for the time being. But the demands will be raised again and again. That will be used as “bargaining chips” whenever the country finds itself in difficult points.

It is already late to understand, let us do it now: federalism in Nepal is not going to evolve in an ideal manner. We have already seen early signals. We cannot save federalism at the huge cost of territorial integrity, self-respect and national interest. Many analysts say that federalism should be saved by removing only the tier of provinces. They say so to save themselves from being labeled as “anti-federalist regressive element.” Otherwise, removal of provinces is the same as abolition of federalism. Therefore, let us not mince words: federalism is fatal to Nepal and must be revoked. Alongside, let us restructure, strengthen and empower local bodies. Let us reduce expenditure and use the huge savings on public education and health to make them free and to improve their quality.

## **Referendum on Secularism**

### **a) A secularist's plea for a referendum on secularism, why?**

Ideologically, I call myself a secularist. But there are numerous examples where blindly following an ideology without considering ground realities have pushed many societies into the abyss. Ideologies are of not much use if they do not resonate at the ground level; they need feet to run. In Nepal's context, the core question many are asking is: whether to espouse the Hindu philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (whole world is a family) or

promote the already divisive and bitter European concept of secularism? In its truest sense, secularism would have meant that the state would protect all religions. The constitution of Nepal defines secularism as “religious, cultural freedoms, including protection of religion, culture handed down from the time immemorial (Sanatan)”.

However, the situation on the ground is such that in recent years, instead of “protection of *Sanatan* religion,” divisions have emerged among religions. For decades, Nepal had not faced such a situation despite being a Hindu nation. Clearly, secularism has led to further religious divisions instead of vice versa. This situation can be a fatal blow to society and the country because cultural and religious sensitivities have triggered brutal and bitter violence in many parts of the world.

Socially and culturally, Nepal had been a Hindu nation since ages. When Padma Shumsher proclaimed Nepal's first constitution in 1948, he had used the phrase “with the blessings from Shree Ram and Pashupatinath.” The Constitution of 1962 expressly stated Nepal as the Hindu nation. Nepal, officially, became the only Hindu nation in the world and it was its unique identity. In the subsequent period of Panchayat and multiparty democracy, apart from few secularists, nobody made an issue of it. Even BP Koirala, despite being a staunch secularist, never spoke against the official declaration of the Hindu nation in 1962 and it never became a political agenda for him. It was never an agenda in numerous political struggles that took place in the country. Compared to most countries in the world, Nepal was a religiously tolerant country.

This does not mean that the country was completely devoid of social, cultural and religious discrimination linked to Hindu religion, tradition and old customs. But they were not the product of a Hindu nation. Rather, they were the result of society and its old backward mindset and superstitions that were nourished by decades of illiteracy and poverty. India is a secular country but in sections of its poor and illiterate communities, the roots of backward mindsets are even deeper and are beset by superstitions. Same is the case with many African countries.

In both opinion and action, I am a staunch proponent of social justice but I am aware that matters of discrimination require long struggle for resolution. By saying so, I am in no way trying to justify discrimination, which is a crime against humanity. It cannot be justified in any circumstances. However, what I mean by "it requires a long struggle for resolution" is, even in a country like the United States, which is a highly educated, developed, prosperous and powerful society, they are still facing the "Black Lives Matter" movement. There are similar situations in many European countries. Japan still faces problems of caste discrimination. Hence, it is natural that a country like ours would be affected by various forms of discrimination. They require not only structural but also educational and economic resolution. Otherwise, it would be difficult to reduce them.

Because Nepal is backward, illiterate and under-developed, we need to be extra-sensitive when addressing the problems of discrimination. Structural reforms alone would not suffice. Otherwise, it can trigger uncontrollable violence. For example, Maoist movement was the violence against discrimination. But it ended up provoking society on ethnic, regional, religious, class-based and gender-based lines by spreading hatred. As a result, thousands lost their lives, and thousands more were displaced. The divisions it sowed are still haunting our society.

Therefore, whenever I speak in programs against ethnic discrimination, I stress on the necessity of free and quality education, health services, social security and jobs for victimized communities and regions, apart from legal and constitutional (structural) measures to reduce discrimination. Rights on papers alone can never end discrimination. The discrimination that we witness in Nepal is linked to traditional complications arising out of "social" laws rather than "religious" or "constitutional" laws. That discrimination is not merely related to "Dalits and Brahmin-Chhetris" but is inherent in Brahmin-Chhetri, Janajati, Madhesi, Dalit and so on.

In principle, individuals have "faith" but a state does not, because the state is common to all. A state cannot give primacy and identity to one group of citizens and deny the same to another group. However, a state cannot run on principles alone. It has to consider the

overall interests and look at the tradition, culture, social stability, peace and balance. Perspectives evolve with time, but haste is not advisable in matters of great sensitivity. Hence, many countries that have espoused modern democracy are still not secular, and have not been able to shake off their relations with certain religions.

## **b) Where did the concept of secularism come from?**

Even when Nepal was the Hindu nation, it had not embraced narrow-minded religious dogmatism. It was the Hindu nation only in name. In principle, non-secular means influencing and directing a state by a particular religion. There are many Muslim countries where religion guides the state. But in Hindu Nepal, that was never the case.

During the People's Movement of 2006 and the subsequent Madhes Movement, no one had raised demands for secularism. Some analysts claim that the demands for secularism had been raised since 1951 during the establishment of democracy in Nepal. But there is a huge difference between certain people making the demand and the demand being raised by the general public. We must accept that there was no mass public demand for secularism during the 2006 movement – neither from general Nepalis nor from communities of minority religious faiths.

But on May 18, 2006, at the meeting of the reinstated House of Representatives chaired by Subas Nemwang, it was suddenly declared that Nepal would henceforth be a secular nation. The parliament passed the declaration. Who were others to question the declaration at that time when the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists were looked upon as ultimate saviors? Nobody questioned the move objectively and nobody asked how it entered into the agenda of the parliamentary declaration.

There were foreign hands in the sudden inclusion of secularism as the prime agenda when the country was in the period of extreme political churning. Many of the Western countries wanted to turn Nepal secular. Their effort went to the extent of blatantly violating the diplomatic norms. The then British Ambassador to Nepal, Andrew Sparkes, wrote an open letter to the Constituent Assembly members on December 10, 2014 urging them to

ensure secularism and right to conversion in the new constitution. Can the Nepali Ambassador in Britain write a similar letter urging the British parliamentarians “to not allow 26 bishops of the Church of England to sit in the House of Lords and not recognise the Queen as the Supreme Governor of the Church of England as such acts are against the idea of secularism?”

But unfortunately, it is clear that many leaders secretly worked on the agenda imposed by foreigners. Many NGOs linked to the leaders had been receiving financial benefits to support the agenda. On the one hand, the Western powers wanted to turn Nepal secular whereas on the other hand, India was bent on making it a republic.

It is said that India had approached King Gyanendra with several enticements and commitments when the demands for republic were being raised. No solid proof has come into the public domain though. But what has been subsequently uncovered is the proposal about "baby King" – the Indian attempt to replace King Gyanendra in the throne with his minor grandson Hridayendra. There are people in the know who are still alive who say that in response to such a proposal, King Gyanendra is said to have told them “over my dead body,” and instead opted to “return the throne to the people of Nepal as their legacy.”

Angered by King Gyanendra's response, India then moved a step ahead from the idea of a “baby King” to the idea of turning Nepal into a republic. Subsequently, a situation emerged whereby Indian proposal for republic was supported by the Western world; and the latter's proposal for secularism by India. As such, the hitherto unheard-of demand for secularism was granted legitimacy through Subas Nemwang. This is the fact.

The people of Nepal did try to break off that legitimacy during the course of constitution making. It is already public that the overwhelming majority of the people had given their support to Hindu nation when the Constituent Assembly had gathered public opinion on the draft constitution in 2015. They had claimed that the Constituent Assembly was necessary to draft the constitution as per the wishes of the people. But the top leaders

blatantly disregarded the wishes of the people when they had overwhelmingly sought an end to secularism.

In a country trapped in the web of illusion spawned by big political parties, the people did not go against their decision. The proponents of the changes since 2006 point out that the people had voted the same political parties with overwhelming majority in the subsequent general election. They say it is equal to public endorsement of all of those changes. This is a very naïve comment. If that was so, then the concept of referendum ought to be removed altogether.

There was only one political party opposed to those agenda but that party lacked public trust. All the other parties were on one side. So what could ordinary Nepalis do? Had the people been given the option in the referendum, they could have voiced their mind on that matter while sticking to their party of choice in the general election. But the people were denied the choice. In the absence of choice, the voters of Nepali Congress could not overnight transform into voters of communists or vice versa. They also could not totally boycott the voting.

Therefore, in recent years, public opinion is strongly building that secularism has been designed to harm the traditional culture and religion of the country. Culture and religion of a country is not only limited to culture and religion. They are linked to the country's identity, self-respect and independence. It cannot be taken up lightly and seen only through the ideological prism.

### **c) Difference between Hindu nation and Hindu nationalism**

The then Sajha Party had, through its National Convention held in Lumbini in 2020, unanimously passed a resolution demanding a referendum to decide upon secularism. Many define the demand for referendum as regressive. It is surprising that people involved in cruel violence and killings and who indulge in constant exploitation of the nation are lumped as “progressives,” whereas the people attempting to peacefully exercise the constitutionally-granted right for holding a referendum to decide on key

issues are called “regressive.” In no civilized society, the attempts for resolving knotty issues through the majority opinion are considered “regression” by any measure.

In a country with eighty percent Hindus, many fear that the result of a referendum on the subject of religion is a foregone conclusion in favor of the Hindu nation. Let us assume there is a referendum. Not all Hindus will support Hindu nation. Many surveys have confirmed this. Secondly, if public opinion is not honored in matters like these, there will be a silent fire of dissension ever-present in the minds of the overwhelming majority, which can explode at some point in the form of extremism or ultra-nationalism.

For example, the state had oppressed the marginalized people for decades who felt discrimination based on class, ethnic, gender and regional lines. And it exploded in the form of Maoist extremism. That extremism has socially, politically and economically pushed the country backward by decades. The hatred, the bitterness and the divisions it sowed in Nepali society; the violence and the immorality it established in politics; and the harm it caused to the economy are unpardonable.

Many say that the Maoist conflict has led to big positive shaking in Nepali society in favor of inclusion, equality, social justice and empowerment. It is easy to make such comments. But take a time to look into the eyes of those sons and daughters whose parents had their throats slit before their eyes – because they were deemed informants by the Maoists. Take time to ask those parents whose appeals for mercy were discarded when their innocent children were taken away never to come back - in the name of launching the insurgency. Ask those villagers how they were subjected to witnessing the merciless dismembering of a young person in the middle of the village – just so that they would be collectively terrorized into submission. Hence, let us not try to justify the Maoist movement which resorted to terrible violence despite the space for winning people's trust in a democratic system.

There are instances where ultra-nationalism struggle has exploded in a much more educated, cultured and prosperous nation. The latest example being the United States.

For a long time, white Americans felt that their feelings were being ignored. Suddenly it found expression in the form of the election of narrow-minded, racist Donald Trump as the country's president. He committed many acts that were hitherto unimaginable at the hands of an American president. Despite such acts, he narrowly missed being the president a second time. He garnered almost half, around 46 percent of the votes. Perhaps that Trump-drawn line of hateful division has turned a bit dim now, but it has not gone away.

Another example is that of our neighbor India. Continuous negligence of the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of people has resulted in the rise of not only the "Hindu sentiments" but the "Hindu nationalism." There is a big difference between wishing for a Hindu nation and becoming a Hindu nationalist. "Hindu nation" is an ideal wish but "Hindu nationalism" is the cover of extremism over that wish. Following Islam is following a religion but becoming Islamist is the expression of extremism.

It does not bode well for minorities if the sentiments of the majority are discarded for a long time. Likewise, oppression of minority rights, too, will not let the majority live in peace. There are many who fear that if Nepal is reinstated as Hindu nation, the minorities and other religious communities may face discrimination from the state. But this concern has an easy and reliable resolution. It is for the purpose of checking the unfettered majoritarianism, or tyranny of the majority, that the concept of constitutional democracy has been adopted. Since the majority decisions may not always be in the interest of the minority, the constitutional democracies have measures in place to ensure that minority rights and interests are not trampled upon – just as our constitution has adopted the measures such as reservation, proportional system and inclusion.

Yes, it is true that the concept of a state being associated with a religion is antithetical to the concept of modern democracy. But it is wrong to assume that any state is regressive just because it is non-secular. As mentioned in the section above, in the United Kingdom, which is known for its distinct democratic culture, 26 Bishops are directly nominated to the Upper House of the parliament. The Queen of England is the titular Head of the

Church of England. One of the most prosperous and happy countries in the world, Denmark, is not secular. These countries are not regressive.

What I am trying to say here is that issues like these do not define a country as a progressive or a regressive one. Well-cultured democracy, inclusion, good governance, robust economy, education, health, social justice, social security, environment, heritage conservation, infrastructure development and employment are the things that shape up whether your country is progressive or regressive.

Nepal is basically a traditional country. One has to be sensitive when addressing the transition of a traditional country into a modern one. Becoming a revolutionary alone won't suffice. In the name of modern democratic principles, we cannot risk any danger by overlooking the religious sentiments that are linked to human sensitivities. Nepali society was backward in terms of education and level of consciousness. But it was never religiously extremist like many other countries in the world.

However, the concept of secularism has hurt the feelings of the majority of Nepalis. This will not promote well-cultured and judicious democracy. In fact, ever since Nepal turned secular, people have started becoming prickly and reactive on issues of religion. In the past Nepal was a "Hindu nation" but now one fears that the country is witnessing the rise of "Hindu nationalism." It is a matter of time before this transforms into religious extremism. Such extremism borne out of majority sentiments can be deadlier.

Generally, the rights and interests of minorities are established only after the majority, too, accepts and lobbies for it. In present day Nepal, the majority is not in a position or does not wish to speak a word on the rights and interests of minority religions. This is not a good sign.

Nepal is the origin of two main civilizations of the world – Hinduism and Buddhism. Since time immemorial, it has also been the center of Kirat faith. Muslims have lived here since centuries. All of these are faiths and civilizations handed down from the time immemorial.

If we disturb this in the name of modernization, what we will get is not a modern but instead a conflict-ridden and hatred-filled society.

While becoming sensitive towards *Sanatan* religion, we also must not forget to promote the religion, culture, dignity, and independence of followers of all other religions or sects. Let us address the concerns and issues of all minority religions and protect their religion, culture and freedom. Along with structural guarantee for their rights, they should be provided with free and quality education, health, social security and employment opportunities. Conversion based on an individual's free choice had not been forbidden in the past and should not be forbidden in future. But acts of proselytization through force or trickery or inappropriate incitements had been forbidden in the past and should be forbidden in future, too. Otherwise, this can destroy Nepal's historic identity and harm the society.

Therefore, the people should get the opportunity to decide on whether Nepal should remain a secular nation. They were requested to offer their views about it during the constitution writing process. However, the overwhelming verdict they offered in favour of a Hindu nation was completely neglected due to the vested interest of certain leaders. In a very sensitive matter like this, which carries far-reaching consequences for the country's future, the citizens should have the right to cast their votes freely. It is a general international practice for political parties to not issue whips in referendums and Nepali political parties should adhere to the same principles as well.

## **Threat to Republic**

Having discussed federalism and secularism, the two out of the three key changes that followed the movement of 2006, it would be natural if one asks what about the third change – that of republic. For an evolving political party, there are four dimensions to its politics. First, the national interest. Second, the people's wishes. Third, the "ideology" developed in consideration of the national interest and the people's wishes. And, fourth, the party-building. Despite national interest being the primary of all concerns, it is neither possible to develop an ideology nor build a party without feeling the pulse of the people.

Just like federalism and secularism, the arrival of the republic, too, was an outside import. The Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists of Nepal were mere puppets. However, in course of time, one can see that public disenchantment and anger against republicanism is not at the same level they are against federalism and secularism. Perhaps, that is why the former King Gyanendra keeps on saying that “first the people should wish for it.”

But, having said that, the major parties and their leaders must understand that public perception about the republic, too, is changing. Despite the unimaginable level of toxicity that was spread against the former King Gyanendra and monarchy, there is still a considerable acceptance of the King as a symbol of unity among all ethnic, lingual, gender, and regional communities. There are people who oppose him. But there are also a large section of people for whom the respect and popularity of the King has not diminished.

This is evident at the display of public outpouring of love wherever he travels – from east to west and from north to south. People come out of their own free-will to hail him – without any party issuing any directive for their presence. These people have come out fully willing to accept the label of “regressive” that would be thrown at them. In fact, there are many more people who silently support him from the safety of their four walls because they do not want to risk getting that label. This is only one sign of a changing situation.

Recently, Prachanda made a surprising public comment in reference to his growing frustration against the President. “(In the past) Kings had dignity, glory and respect whereas now there is neither glory nor respect. What has happened to the institution (of the President) we built?” The comment may have come as an emotional outburst. But it certainly is not a good sign for republicans.

There is no basis to believe that the future presidents would be any different to a comparably better Ram Baran Yadav or much-tarnished Bidya Devi Bhandari. Quite simply, the leaders who want to install their cronies in anti-corruption agencies to save

their skins, would certainly want to put a pliant candidate in Shital Niwas, the president's office. Everyone has understood the importance of having an ally as the President in crucial times.

Federalism and secularism were expected to strengthen our independence, unity, equality, goodwill and harmony. Instead they have harmed our independence, unity, equality, goodwill and harmony and have destabilized the society. To expect improvement is similar to expecting a patient suffering from serious illness to be cured by domestic treatment. But in the case of a republic, there might still be room for improvement. Otherwise, the demands for revocation of the republic, too, will increase in future.

It is not necessary to launch a tirade against the monarchy to protect the republic. During the whole period of the Panchayati regime, people were taught to denounce the multiparty system. And now they are teaching us that Prithvi Narayan Shah was expansionist and King Mahendra was a murderer of democracy. Whereas, those who exploit the country every day and those who have blood of Nepalis on their hands are regarded as “great progressives.”

The Nepali society is bereft of factual and objective analysis of its history. In leading universities of the world, they put a high premium on the learning of history. But in Nepal the number of students who want to learn history in Tribhuwan University is almost zero. Only the professors remain. The prejudiced treatment meted out to history from Panchayat times has turned Nepali society into reactive, one-sided, unbalanced, reproachful and laden with inferiority-complex. The society that does not get to study its history objectively can never have a balanced perspective.

There are two ways of saving the republic. One, quickly control corruption, improve good governance, service-delivery and development. Two, keep the institution of president beyond politics and ensure its objectivity. Otherwise, the republic, too, will suffer erosion. No party can stop the turning tide of public emotions. Everyone should realize it sooner than later.

## **Ensuring Interests and Rights of Women, Madhesi, Janajati, Minority, Marginalized Communities etc.**

One of the key components that need serious consideration in the proposition for changing course is related to the ensuring of rights and interests of various class, ethnic, gender, and regional communities belonging to all political, economic, social and cultural walks of life.

Abolition of federalism and referendum on secularism should, in no way, compromise or undermine the achievements made since 1951 and especially through 2006 movement in the direction of equal opportunities, social justice, reservation, inclusion and equitable prosperity for Adivasi Janajati, women, Dalit, Madhesi, Muslim, Tharu, gender minorities and people with disability. All of those achievements must be further improved upon and consolidated.

Presently, all these achievements are wearing away. We are turning “more” into Brahmin, Chhetri, Dalit, Janajati, Madhesi, Muslims and “less” into a Nepali. Divisions have widened among ethnicities and religious faiths. Ultimately, that will harm everyone. Therefore, abolition of federalism and referendum on secularism is the tool to stop the swift erosion of unity and harmony in Nepali society and to arrest the downward slide of our glorious history, culture, independence, self-respect and integrity.

Abolition of federalism does not mean reduction of rights, services, development priority or undermining of interests, participation, respect and empowerment of local bodies. Basically, it is about removing the meaningless, unnecessary and wasteful provincial structures and restructuring and strengthening the local bodies, which I have already discussed above. Hence, nobody should be worried about the abolition of federalism.

As far as the concept of referendum on secularism is concerned, Nepal as a Hindu nation never displayed any religious zealotry or fanaticism that we see in Saudi Arabia, Sudan,

Iran, Pakistan or Afghanistan. The government itself used to bear the cost for Hajj pilgrimage for its Muslim citizens. South of the royal palace, a mere stone's throw away stood a mosque. Nepal was a model of religious harmony. But with the arrival of secularism, the peaceful Hindus who wished for "Hindu nation" are provoked and are turning into "Hindu nationalists." Secularism is fueling discord and intolerance instead. Religious freedom and rights do not mean you can give out sacks of rice with Bibles inside or preach Christianity within the Pashupati complex or proselytize by offering new motorcycles or foreign jaunts.

We have only been taking a hollow pride in our religion and culture but we have never been able to draw the global attention it deserved. We failed to showcase the model of Hindu Nepali state where *Sanatan* Hindu worshippers had lived in perfect harmony with Muslims and other religious groups even as various countries in the world were mired in religious violence and conflict.

It would never be in the interest of other religious groups to hurt the sentiments of majority Hindus by proselytizing through enticement or spreading bitterness and hatred in the society. I have discussed above how hurting the sentiments of the majority in the name of appeasing minorities can only give birth to extremism and why striking a delicate balance on this matter is extremely important. It is necessary to create an environment conducive for the majority to advocate the rights of minorities. There is no need to write down the word secularism in the constitution for that purpose.

Instead, why don't we build a historic religious center of the Kirat community? Let us also build artistic and splendid Mosques like the Faisal Mosque in Islamabad. In fact, the Gulf countries will be happy to help. Let us build Lumbini into a global center for Buddhists. Buddhists around the world will be happy to assist. It has been ages since we built a distinctly majestic Hindu temple in Nepal. Take for example the sprawling Akshardham temple complex in India. Let us build grand temples with our unique architecture that can surprise the world. Such buildings will be a matter of pride for Nepalis of all religious faiths. Let the world say that Nepal has no "extremism." Where Hindus are happy and where

non-Hindus are equally happy. Let the religious tourists from the world over travel to Nepal to visit Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist or other religious centers.

That is how religious freedom, respect and independence should look like. Compare that to the present situation where you can find churches in rented apartments, and no proper mosque where you can pray in peace. Buddhist centers are a bit okay, there are a lot of splendid monasteries. So far as temples are concerned, we have not even been able to conserve those that were built by our ancestors.

We do not do what we should do. We only do what we should not do. Nationalism of Nepal is, as Prithvi Narayan Shah said, a “garden nationalism” with all kinds of flowers adding to its beauty. Any attempt to undermine it will bring utter ruin to the garden. And, the indications are increasingly negative. Let's be aware before it's too late.

## **Process of Changing Course**

It is normal for people, who believe that Nepal's politics needs changing course, to harbor a question: “but how?”

First thing, let us not even fancy any idea of taking up arms for any further change in the country. Violence may be used where the country's constitution is not democratic. The Maoists have already committed unpardonable crimes by resorting to violence when they could have exercised the right guaranteed by then Constitution of 1990 to pursue peaceful means for any change. Those who did not lose their children, parents, brothers or sisters may not feel the pain caused by the Maoist crime. They can only read about it.

Like the constitution of 1990, the new Constitution of 2015 also provides ample room for putting forth your opinion peacefully and to try to win the people's hearts and minds. Hence, any movement to change the political course must stick to the peaceful route by winning the hearts and minds of the people – and not through destructive struggles that resort to violence, Nepal bandhs, and so on.

Second thing, if one wishes to bring about change peacefully by exercising constitutionally-granted rights, there are two routes available. Both routes stick to the constitutional means. Peaceful exercise of democratic rights granted by the constitution and aimed at consolidation of sustainable democracy cannot be called “regression,” -- that is progression.

It is a common global practice that decisions on matters of important national significance with long term implications are settled by general referendum. It is well-accepted global democratic practice to go for referendums to settle issues that cannot be appropriately resolved by periodic general elections alone. Take for instance the 2016 Brexit referendum. There was a huge debate in Britain on whether it should remain within the European Union or exit from the union. But the political parties did not propose settling the issue through general election. In fact, even within a party, there were diverse opinions about Brexit. Hence, they opted for the referendum, as it involved matters of huge and long-term national importance.

The matters of secularism and federalism were not only of huge national importance but also had implications for the nation's survival itself. However, the leaders of the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists, under the influence and duress from their foreign masters, decided on such huge matters not through national referendum but through a simple decision from the parliament. The proponents of the changes since 2006 point out that the people had voted the same political parties with overwhelming majority in the subsequent general election. They say it is equal to public endorsement of all of those changes. This is a very naïve comment. If that was so, then the concept of referendum ought to be removed altogether.

There was only one political party opposed to those agenda but that party lacked public trust. All the other parties were on one side. So, what could ordinary Nepali do? Had the people been given the option in the referendum, they could have voiced their mind on that matter while sticking to their party of choice in the general election. But the people were denied the choice. In the absence of choice, the voters of Nepali Congress could

not overnight transform into voters of communists or vice versa. They also could not totally boycott the voting.

We have already committed blunders and to correct those blunders we have to go for a referendum on matters like secularism, which is directly connected to the sentiments of every individual. And, we need to respect the verdict of the people.

However, with regard to federalism, it does not matter even if we don't go for a referendum as federalism is a source of corruption, economic burden and a threat to national integrity and it can be abolished by amending the constitution with the two-thirds majority in the parliament. However, to achieve that objective, people should give a two-thirds majority to the party which carries the agenda of a referendum on secularism and abolition of federalism by restructuring and strengthening local bodies.

Wishing for change but sticking to the age-old voting pattern will not lead to the fulfillment of the wish. Moreover, it is not adequate to have parties that raise those banners. There are a few such parties in the country already. What is needed is their honesty along with those agenda and capability to lead the country. Otherwise, once again there will only be ideological and superficial changes while the wish for patriotic transformation will remain unfulfilled.

These are the options available to effect the proposed course change as per the current constitution. They can be expected to deliver a smooth transition through "peaceful revolution." Such democratic and peaceful revolution will not disrupt stability and development efforts. If one attempts to bring about the change through the street struggle, then that will upset the stability and development for a long time. To push Nepal towards that vicious cycle once again would be unfortunate.

However, if we do not pursue this constitutional course, then it will only be a matter of time before the forces who want to pursue the unconstitutional course will be dominant. Delayed "awareness" will then turn into "remorse." Let us all rise above the so-called

ghosts of “regression” and shake off the fear to say it aloud: Nation above the Notion –  
Where will us Nepalis live without Nepal!

## **Alternative Politics/Welfare Democracy:**

### **What does it mean?**

In recent years, the efforts to displace the bigger political parties by value-based politics have been termed by many as alternative politics. I also use this terminology from time to time. But alternative politics and welfare democracy are synonymous. They both are grounded in true values of democracy.

They aim to create a state that guarantees all its citizens with good governance, equal opportunity, equal justice, and service delivery. In this context, the alternative politics or welfare democracy does not depend on whether the country is federal or not; or whether the country is Hindu or secular. It is not the system where you label those that share your views as “progressive” and all others as “regressive.”

Welfare democracy is the difference between the pretentious and liberal democracy; honest and fraud leaders; patriotic and treacherous leadership; good and bad governance; just and unjust society; and equitable and inequitable prosperity. Welfare democracy incorporates the agenda of "democracy" as raised by Nepali Congress; 'socialism" as raised by communists; "identity" as raised by Terai/Madhes parties; and "good governance, equitable and welfare state" as raised by Bibeksheel Sajha party.

Every politics has its distinct context and background. If one does not take those context and background into consideration, then even the best of ideas will be limited into hollow slogans, and will only invite complications. In Nepali context, it is necessary to divide the agenda of Welfare Democracy or Alternative Politics into two sections for easier comprehension.

## **a) Political-Social Agenda**

- 1) Abolition of federalism by restructuring and strengthening local bodies
- 2) Referendum on Secularism
- 3) Conservation of religion, identity, culture and heritage
- 4) Reservation, Social justice and Inclusion

These agenda are linked to the integrity, independence, sovereignty, self-respect, peace, identity and existence of the country.

## **b) Political-Economic Agenda**

- 1) Control of corruption and good governance
- 2) Economic stimulation
- 3) Employment
- 4) Free and quality public education, health and social security
- 5) Housing for low-income people, and quality public transport
- 6) Balanced foreign policy
- 7) Scientific land use and infrastructure development
- 8) Environment Protection

These agenda of lives and livelihoods are linked to the total and sustainable transformation of Nepal within our own lifetime.

The agenda discussed above might seem like chasing a *Ram Rajya* or a utopia. But it is not. Welfare democracy is all about establishing a *Ramro Rajya* or a well-governed country. If one chases ideals and perfection not based on reality that may turn into a chimera. But a “well-governed” country can be achieved in reality. All over the world, successful politics and governance walks a tightrope between ideals and reality. It is, of course, difficult to walk that tightrope because it will seem like you are overlooking ideals at some point, and overlooking the ground reality at others. But that balance is always in the overall interest of society and the country.

Many will claim that the attempt to hold a referendum on secularism and revoke federalism is akin to resurgence of conservatism and it can never become progressive political movement. But, like I mentioned above, the politics aimed at benefiting the society and the nation cannot be simply based on hollow ideals. It has to be grounded in the history, culture, geography, economy and regional and international geopolitics.

If the country itself is in the danger of division, if there is real danger of religious extremism taking hold, if the federalism is slowly going to lead to disintegration through the harmful concepts like multinational state and right to self-determination, then where would one go asking for social justice? For a country like Nepal, territorial integrity, independence, sovereignty, peace and stability are primary pre-conditions for any respect to identity, guarantee of social justice and equitable prosperity.

What will be the meaning of idealism and principles if the society and the nation runs the risk of turning unstable and violence-ridden like Afghanistan, Iraq, Ethiopia, Sudan, Syria etc. Many might think that such dire predictions are groundless. They might think it is unnecessary fear-mongering to justify one's belief. I disagree. We have seen many countries in Asia, Europe and Africa where such conflicts have occurred. Therefore, countries with long-term vision, while formulating their national priority, tend to give highest of priority to safeguarding national security by evaluating internal and external risks.

In the Nepali context, the political, economic, social, cultural problems faced by all ethnic, gender, regional communities and class are not only ordinary problems but are problems of very serious nature. Whatever be the form of political system, there is a need for structural and behavioral reforms to address those problems at functional as well as emotional level. I have briefly discussed it in the previous section on "Ensuring the rights of Janajatis/minorities/marginalized."

Reforms in constitution and laws, and practice of inclusion have made a great leap forward in reducing the discrimination. But that progress is now at risk of being

overshadowed by the needless espousing of federalism and secularism. The entry of federalism and secularism has further divided Nepalis in political, economic, social, cultural, ethnic, class, gender and regional level. It has polarized us emotionally, too.

It is not the welfare democracy or alternative politics to follow the followers of federalism and secularism that were imposed on the country by those who resorted to killing fellow Nepalis; those who instigated violence in their motherland from the safe havens in foreign soil; those who gave up ideals for the sake of power and perks; and those who danced to the tune of foreigners.

It is clear that secularism and federalism are “imported agenda” that were installed more due to foreign interference than internal politics. If one does not believe the facts and analysis in this document, one can study the objectively prepared investigative and academic analysis. That will prove how and why these were imported agenda.

Hence, in our context, to hold a referendum on secularism and to abolish federalism by restructuring and strengthening local bodies is a “progressive” agenda – not at all “regressive.” This is the change of course. If you are going to Gorkha, you cannot walk towards Gorakhpur. However, it's all about personal freedom and if one aims to walk to Gorakhpur, one is free to do so. But one has to bear in mind that Gorakhpur is a kind of destination from where one cannot choose to change course again.

## **Appendix**

### **Feelings and Forewords**

During my twenty years of working for the BBC World Service in London and Kathmandu, I had the opportunity to understand world politics in general and the Nepali politics in particular. I had the urge to further brush up my political understanding and so I did a Master's in international politics from the University of London. Even so, what I have understood of politics till now through my experience as a political journalist, interactions with politicians and the study of political literature, I am sure there are many shortcomings and weaknesses in my understanding. As the Nepali poet laureate, Laxmi Prasad

Devkota, said, “first, it's difficult to understand and the more you understand, the more difficult it gets.” The understanding is never complete. They evolve and they are always limited.

I am clear that there are shortcomings to my understanding as well. But I hold dear the two ideals - of integrity and patriotism. I have never allowed any weakness to creep into those firmly held convictions. Many may find the statement as boastful and pretentious. But, one has to speak up one's strongly held beliefs when necessary and I am willing to bear the consequences for speaking my mind.

I was closely associated with journalism and philanthropy before I joined politics. In both those sectors, I had agreements and disagreements with many, but nobody raised any question on my honesty. I left journalism with lots of appreciation from many quarters. I was equally endowed with love and praise from Nepalis all over the world during my philanthropic works. We worked together to do many virtuous projects for Nepalis in need in various parts of Nepal. But there were a handful of people who regularly raised questions on my integrity. I was forced to write an emotional article on Mother's Day in my defence in 2016. Many still continue to spread malicious rumors that I am here to 'spread Christianity" or work for foreign agencies to earn “dollars.” But they are not points of concern for me. My conscience is clear.

What worries me is the state of the country. These days, there is a popular comment that many of our youths share with me. Having had decent education and exposure, they consider themselves as global citizens and say that the concept of patriotism itself is outdated in today's world. I usually respond to them by referring to the plight of Palestinians. “You guys have your country. But go and try to suggest a Palestinian why he/she has to have their country and why he/she can't be content having a good life? Then you will realize the meaning of patriotism and having a country; then you will feel the pain of not having a country.” Hence, to whatever extent the concept of globalisation expands, patriotism will always carry a great value.

During my 15 years of stay in the United Kingdom, I used to tell my African and South Asian friends: “We enjoy our good life in London. In weekend gatherings we never tire of talking about politics back home and always criticize the state of affairs there. But the fact remains that a handful of educated, worldly wise and honest (which we claim to be) people like us have abandoned our respective countries and left them in the hands of an incapable lot. Therefore, we are more responsible than them for the poor state of our countries. People like us need to go abroad, become educated and gather experience and expertise. But we should return back when time is still on our side.”

That was the strong belief that ultimately pushed me to return home. I had no other vested interest in my return or in establishing the HELP NEPAL Network and getting involved in its philanthropic campaign “Hundred Rupees a Month Fund.” The only interest was to serve Nepal; to serve that place where I feel complete. In informal talks, some people do tell me what they think is the real reason for my return: “Leave patriotism aside, you must have returned for the sake of your mental peace and interest,” they say. It is not appropriate to look at every action of a person through the prism of “human pursuit of self-interest and happiness.”

If you use that measurement then you will have to discard the declaration by one of the richest persons on earth Bill Gates to donate 95 percent of his wealth for philanthropy, or the exemplary good works done by Nepal's Mahabir Pun or Ramji Adhikari as being guided “by their own pursuit of happiness” – social service being only their pretext. In fact, if pursuit of personal happiness is at the cost of society's interest, then it can be deplorable. Otherwise, where personal pursuit benefits society, that must be positively respected.

Upon my return home in 2009, I was content for a long time to just engage in my profession, writings and philanthropic activities. But like the millions of Nepalis, I was also hurt by the continuous deterioration of political values and how it was impacting the country's situation. Personally, I could say that I was kind of successful in my profession. But when your country keeps on losing its historic glory and the situation keeps

deteriorating, you cannot remain happy from inside. I, too, started feeling a growing sense of embarrassment and disenchantment.

Reason for a country's decline does not only rest with bad political leadership, it also should be shared by the silence of the good people. I had been continuously writing and advocating that capable and good people should join politics in order to change society. Slowly I started to ponder whether I needed to make that jump first.

In the meantime, I was approached by many top leaders of all major political parties who urged me to join their organization. But I was clear: "If I joined any of these old parties, I might be successful but the country won't be." In other words, given my professional and educational experience, I might bag some positions, but that would make no difference in the transformation of the country. Perhaps it was my good fortune that I could find many people who shared my thoughts. Hence, there was no vested interest that pushed me towards the uncertain path of building an entirely new political party – apart from my sense of duty towards Nepal.

It is a fact that my generation and the previous generation are mainly responsible for the current plight of our country – where if developed countries were to relax their visa regimes, the entire generation, with some exception, would queue up to leave the country and take their parents, too. What did we do? How did we end up with a country where you can see love for their country oozing into social media but nobody wants to actually live here?

I engaged in philanthropy, returned to Nepal and, ultimately, got involved in launching a new political party -- all for the sake of the country. But I am aghast that slowly but surely the country is heading towards crisis. When I resigned from the BBC in 2017 to establish Sajha Party along with like-minded friends, I firmly believed that we needed to institutionalize the changes brought about by the 2015 Constitution such as republic, federalism and secularism. That was how I conducted myself. However, the party document did specify that if public disenchantment grew due to these changes, or if these

agenda led only to instability, then there would be no alternative to settling these through referendum.

Sajha Party, and then unified, Bibeksheel Sajha Party, both espoused Welfare Democracy as its guiding political philosophy and put a premium on socio-economic-political agenda such as free and quality public education, health and social security, corruption control, good governance, employment, development, social justice and equitable prosperity. We strongly advocated in favour of those agenda. However, there were many misgivings in my mind regarding how future Nepal will shape up given the grave sensitivities related to the country's geopolitics and social diversity. Unfortunately, those misgivings started turning into reality.

The situation is becoming increasingly sensitive. Any future change of government is certainly not going to make any substantial difference. I feel that there is not enough seriousness about the growing risks of external and internal security, social harmony and territorial integrity, as well as the existence of the country itself. It may be too late when we realize the situation. Therefore, I have reached a conclusion that it is wrong for me to remain silent or indifferent to these specific issues that my conscience is witness to. Therefore, I have concluded that I cannot remain a mute spectator and be indifferent to these primary agenda facing the country.

The “progressive” society is sure to label me “regressive.” But I do not care. If somebody calls those leaders who emerged through killing others; who still continue to indulge in corruption and exploit the country indirectly killing many more poor people; and who do not bat an eyelid to harm the self-respect of their country as “progressive leaders,” and instead demonizes me for professing my non-violent, honest, constitutional and fully democratic thoughts, then I am ready to become a “demon” to them.

I know fully well that with these thoughts for change, I may have to lose many of my well-wishers and those who believe in me, too. There would be hateful trolling in social media. I will be compelled to swallow the poisonous reactions. I am ready for all that. I am sad that I could not become what some of my well-wishers thought of.

I have always evaluated a person on the basis of merits and not ideology. I have never demonized anybody who does not share my belief for their polite and peaceful dissent. I will never do so in future as well as I am not a slave to any ideology -- but I am a slave to this country. I will never compromise with my conscience and patriotism till I breathe the last. So that I can end up on my deathbed with a smile on my face. That would be a “progressive” death for me.

It is “progressive” for me to walk the right course. I have felt a great weight has come off my shoulders by sharing these feelings and forewords. Whether we share the same ideology or not, whatever I have become today is the result of your criticism, appreciation and inspiration. There is a lot more to do and the biggest task of transforming Nepal is still due. May you always prosper! May Nepal always prosper! Thank you!

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