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Historical Study on the Classification of Nepali Muslims

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Abstract

Nepal has a wide diversity of religious groups. Muslims arrived in Nepal before 500 years coexisted in a Hindu-dominated society. Nepal's Muslim population has taken over nearly 77 districts. The bulk of the Muslim population resides in the country's southern plane. Due to religious beliefs, Nepali Muslims are also divided into Sunni and Shia sects. The Sunnis are the majority whereas Shias constitute a small minority. Sunnis are also divided into different sub-sects based on their belief system. Within Sunni the Deobandhis are the majority of the population, while the Barelvis are minorities. This entire circumstance is important to comprehending Muslims in Nepal. Scholars classified Nepali Muslims based on their residency status and job description rather than indigenous feature. As a result, determining their categorization became crucial. Re-categorization of Nepali Muslims highlights a new dimension and disseminates new knowledge in the study of Nepali Muslims.

Keywords: *Nepali Muslims, Arrival, Barelvi, Deobandhi, Migration, Religion, Classification.*

Background: Nepal is home to diverse ethnic and religious groups. The religious composition of Nepali society is Hindus 81.34 percent, Buddhists 9.04 percent, Islam 4.38 percent, Kirat 3.04 percent, Christianity 1.41 percent, and others (Census, 2011).

The total Muslim population is 1162370 and contributes 4.38 percent of the total population, making them the third largest religious group (Census, 2011). The Terai's Muslim-majority districts include Banke, Kapilbastu, Parsa, and Rautahat, which have more than half of the Muslim population. The second Muslim majority districts include Bara, Mahottari, Dhanusa, Siraha, and Sunsari, while the two districts Rupendehi and Sarlahi comprise a substantial third religious group (Census, 2011). There is a tiny Muslim community in Kathmandu Valley and the surrounding hills.

Malla kings welcomed Muslims to settle in Kathmandu for the first time in history during the medieval period. Following that, Shah Rulers welcomed them to reside in tiny independent hilly states. Muslims were invited to perform at Rana court as well as horse

caretaker during the Rana reign. Because of deforestation in the Terai and Nepali hill people's unwillingness to move there in the late Rana period, Muslims were encouraged to settle in the Terai for farming. In this manner, Muslims arrived in Nepal and established themselves permanently. Muslims have now become an inseparable part of Nepali society. Many native and foreign scholars have categorized Nepali Muslims according to their understanding. Their classification wasn't examined academically. Hence it should be examined and re-classify them.

Statement of the Problem: The Muslims came to Nepal in different times for different purposes and settled in different geographical regions. Most of the Hill Muslims, Tibetan and Kashmiri Muslims in Kathmandu Valley and hilly region follow Barlevi School and are quite liberal in socio-cultural matters with a strong historical past, whereas Terai Muslims and Hindusthani Muslims (the Indian immigrants) follow orthodox Deobandhi School and are conservative in character and have a relatively short historical background. This whole scenario is critical for understanding Muslim classification in Nepal. Nepali Muslims were categorized according to their residential status and job category by the foreign and native researchers. Hence it became critical identifying their classification.

The Nepali Muslims are not given adequate attention by the researchers and they have not yet been examined academically. Some national and international publication attempted to address the Muslim categorization in Nepal, but they did not handle the entire picture. This article aims to highlight unidentified issues on the classification of Nepali Muslims.

Research Question: Many scholars listed in review of literature had attempted to address Nepali Muslims but they have not covered the overall aspects of categorization. There are some areas which are not addressed that are being focused by this research. The aim of this article is to highlight the gap left by previous researchers on the classification of Nepali Muslims.

The study attempts to address the following questions:

1. How Nepali Muslims can be categorized according to their belief system?
2. What will be the measures to classify Nepali Muslims?

Objective of the study:

In order to present the study two main objectives were selected:

1. To discuss the categorization of Nepali Muslims on the basis of belief system.
2. To investigate the Muslim classification in Nepalese society.

Review of the Literature: Before proceeding to the topic under investigation, it is prudent to evaluate the previously published literature on various fields of Nepali Muslims. With the exception of Gaborieau, Quresa Banu, Shanker Thapa, Abdul Salam Khan, Niranjan Ojha, D.S. Kunwar, Samima Siddhika and David Seddon, no substantial study on Muslims in Nepal has been done on such a broad topic. While identifying research concerns, academics and other researchers in Nepal have been proven to be biased against Nepali Muslims. Without a precise cause, native scholars are typically hesitant to engage with them.

Gaborieau's (1977) "Minorités Musalmanes dans le Royaume Hindou du Nepal" focuses on the history and ethnography of Nepal's Muslim minority. Similarly, Gaborieau has written several research studies on Muslims covering a wide range of topics from hills to Tarai. These articles are: Les Musalman du Nepal, objet et mondes (1966), Les curute du moyen Nepal, place d'un groupe de musalmanes dans la société des castes (1966), Muslims in the Hindu kingdom of Nepal (1977), Aspects of lineage among the Muslim Bangle makers of Nepal (1978), Life cycle ceremonies of converted Muslims in Nepal and northern India (1984).

In his book "Nepal Ra Nepali Musalman," local writer Abdul Salam Khan (2071 B.S.) presents general information on Nepali Muslims. His work is primarily concerned with the socioeconomic position of Nepali Muslims in Kapilbastu.

"The Muslim Communities of Nepal," by David Seddon (2018), is based on a field study report. It focuses on the socio-cultural and political situations of Nepali Muslims in Nepalgunj.

In their book "Muslims in Nepal: Social, Historical, and Economic Perspectives," Niranjan Ojha and D.S. Kunwar (2018) critically examine the social existence, and economic status of the Muslim community.

Shanker Thapa (1986) has written extensively about Nepali Muslims. His contributions, "A study of population and family planning among Muslims in a Nepalese Town" and "Caste Hierarchy among Muslims" (1995), are outstanding works in the subject of Nepali Muslims. He has completed his coverage of the Terai Muslims.

In her Master's thesis "Introduction to Muslims in Nepal," Quraisha Banu (1980) presents an instructive and broad overview of Nepali Muslims. This study looks at the Muslim social structure, religion, festivals and rituals, women's position, and family life among Kathmandu's Muslims.

Methodology: This is a historical investigation. A qualitative research approach was employed to this article. In this study, descriptive, analytical, and informative methods were employed. This research relied on content analysis. An in-depth interview (with an open-ended questionnaire) was conducted with renowned individuals to obtain firsthand data on the issue. Respondents for the in-depth interview were chosen from Jame Masjid, Kashimree Taqia, and the Jame Masjid Management Committee. The dialogue technique was used with the relevant stakeholders, and both formal and informal talks were undertaken. The participants of the in-depth interview had requested not to disclose their name thus only the framework had been introduced in this article.

This study is based on current data, although historical references are included when applicable. The sources of information used in this study are both primary and secondary. The library research approach is mostly utilized for secondary information. Books, journal papers, internet websites, and relevant publications have been appropriately cited. All of the material gathered has been categorized, summarized, and analyzed, and some consideration will be given to this research.

The scope of this study is confined to a historical assessment of Nepali Muslims. It focuses on general activities in Nepal. This research doesn't cover other aspects such as social, political, legal, economic, and others.

Analysis: Nepal, a small Himalayan country is the home land for several castes, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Majority population of Nepal is Hindu. Besides, there are other religious people residing in Nepal as minorities. If we look the Muslim population they have occupied almost 77 district of Nepal. The majority of the Muslim population lives in the country's southern plane. From east to west, they dwell in both rural and urban areas. They have a sizable population in this area. In terms of Muslims, a tiny number of Muslims reside as a separate religious community in the Hilly regions and in Kathmandu (CBS 2011).

Muslims contribute 4.38 percent of the entire population according to census 2011, however the proportion reported by Muslim organizations is substantially higher (In-depth interview, 2021). Rapid migration from the Indian plane to the Terai contributed significantly to this surge. The movement from the Indian plane to the Terai is constant and persistent (Census, 2011). Kathmandu, Nepal's capital has 21866 Muslim residents, accounting for 1.25 percent of the city's population (www.mcn.gov.np).

Arrival: Historical evidence suggests that Nepal and Arabia had some form of trading relationship (Regmi, 2026). The first arriving Muslims in Nepal were the Kashmiri merchants. They came to Nepal via Laddhak and Tibet during the reign of King Ratna Malla, the ruler of Kathmandu. This marked the beginning of the history of Muslim population in Kathmandu. The main purpose of their arrival was to trade in Nepal (Subedi, 2040). The second batch of Muslims arrived in Nepal, mainly Kathmandu, during the reign of King Pratap Malla in the 17th century; they are known as Hindusthani Muslims (Gaborieau, 1981). During the reign of Bhaskar Malla (1700-1722 A.D.), the third batch arrived in Nepal. The fourth batch arrived during the reign of Jaya Prakash Malla, the final Malla King. Gorkha's king, King Prithivi Narayan Shah, had also brought Muslim arm specialists from India. Similarly, King Ram Shah of Gorkha asked Muslims to migrate there. All those Muslims who settled in a distant hill village and began selling bangles are now known as Churauteys (Gaborieau, 1981). Similarly, Palpa's King Mahodatta Sen recruited Muslim arm specialists from India. Likely, King Damodar Sen of Tanahun also had invited Muslims from Oudh. This immigration was before the unification campaign (Ojha, 2018). Later, they were settled in different parts of Nepal including Kathmandu valley.

The Terai area of Nepal had a large influx of Muslims during and after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 A.D. (Indian Historian said it as first independent movement and the western authors claimed as Mutiny). Jung Bahadur Rana protected and housed Begum Hazrat Mahal, Begum of Oudh. Knowing about Begum's asylum, Muslims from India's border region began migrating to Nepal's Terai region. Because of topographical reasons and malaria, hill people were not keen in migrating to the Terai- the deforested land, thus Indians were encouraged. As a result, a large number of Muslim farmers moved to this area.

In this manner, Muslims arrived in Nepal and established themselves permanently. Till 1950 Muslims were welcomed by the Rana rulers in different time frame. Nepal was freed from authoritarian Rana control in 1950, and democracy was founded. Migration was not halted at the southern border in this shifting circumstance. Many Indians, including Muslims, arrived as migrant workers and settled. This occurrence was both continuous and rapid. Migration from the Indian plane has not ceased to this day (Ojha, 2016).

Classification of Nepali Muslims: Nepali Muslims are also divided into Sunni and Shia sects due to religious beliefs. The Sunni sect is practiced by the vast majority of Muslims in Nepal and Shias are a minority in terms of population. Because of differences in belief on several areas of Islam, the Sunnis themselves divided into numerous sub-sects (Thapa, 1995). The whole belief system of Nepal's Muslim community is borrowed from their counterparts in India. A considerable majority of Nepali Muslims are either trained or influenced by the orthodox Deoband School, while other Muslims, albeit few in number these days, are influenced by the Barelvi School (In-depth interview, 2021).

Many local and foreign researchers have lumped Nepali Muslims into numerous groups based only on their residence status and job description rather than their indigenous traits and belief system. In his book "Nepal Ra Nepali Musalman," Abdul Salam Khan (2011 B.S.) classified Nepali Muslims into five groups; however David Seddon (2018) classified them into six groups in his book "The Muslim Communities of Nepal." Based on their traits, N. Ojha and D.S. Kunwar classified Nepali Muslims into four divisions. During the 14th century, Churautey, Hindusthani (Indian) Muslims, moved to Nepal as utensil specialists. To make ends meet for the time being, they started selling bangles. Gaborieau (1977) classified them as hill Muslims and gave them the name Churautey. They were, in fact, the Barelvis. Without realizing it, he had classified them.

According to Abdul Salam Khan, Nepali Muslims are as follows:

- Kashmiri Muslim
- Terai Muslim
- Hill Muslim
- Tibetan Muslim
- Indian Muslim

D.S. Kunwar and N. Ojha have classified Nepali Muslims into Four Categories. According to them, Nepali Muslims are as follows:-

- The Kashmiri
- Tibetan Muslims
- Terai Muslims
- Hindusthani Muslims

David Seddon has classified Nepali Muslims as follows:-

- Hill Muslims
- Kashmiri Muslims
- Hindusthani Muslims
- Tibetan Muslims

- Muslims of Kathmandu and
- Muslims of Terai.

However, historical data does not support these claims. According to historical evidence, Nepali Muslims who live in the hills, Terai, or Kathmandu or elsewhere are migrants from Tibet, Kashmir, and India. It cannot be categorized based on their settlement. They are the descendants of Kashmiri Muslims, Tibetan Muslims, and Indian Muslims, and live in the hills, Terai, or Kathmandu.

The Kashmiris are religiously distinct Barelvis. Historically, Kashmir was used to refer to the Kashmir Valley (Snedden, 2015). Today, it refers to the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir (which comprises Jammu, the Kashmir Valley, and Ladakh), the Pakistan-administered areas of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit–Baltistan, and the Chinese-administered parts of Aksai Chin and the Trans-Karakoram Tract. Kashmir was an independent kingdom till 1947. As a result, Kashmiri Muslims have their own distinct identity based on their indigenous characteristics and religious beliefs as Barelvis.

Hindusthani Muslims and Terai Muslims are also the result of Indian immigration. Despite the fact that their reasons for migrating and migration times differed, they all moved from India. The hill Muslims- Churautey and Pahadiya Muslims; they do not have an indigenous feather like Kashmiris and Tibetan Muslims. They were given names based on their occupations and where they lived. They are descended from Hindusthani Muslims or Indian Muslims and adhere to the Deobandhi School of thought. As a result, various categories of Muslims might be grouped together. Thus, Muslims in Nepal may be divided into three broad categories based on their indigenous characteristics and two distinct types based on their beliefs.

They are:-

A. The Kashmiri – Barelvis: According to the Vamsavalis (Chronicles), the first Muslims to live in Nepal, arrived in Kathmandu from Kashmir in the late 15th and early 16th centuries during the reign of King Ratna Malla (1484-1520 C.E.) (Seddon, 2018). They arrived in Nepal around 1482 for business reasons, via Ladakh and Tibet (Khan, 2071). The Kashmiris saw themselves to be socially superior to other Muslim communities. Kashmiris have less social and cultural engagement with other Muslim groups. They've got their own mosque. The Pancha Kashmiri Taquia mosque in Ghantaghar (Kathmandu) is strictly reserved to the Barelvis, who believe that their rank is superior to that of others. They visit graveyards and pay homage to Muslim saints. In 1524 A.D., a Muslim saint built the first mosque in Nepal, the Pancha Kashmiri Takia (Ojha, 2016). Other Muslims, both native and foreign, attend the Nepal Jame Masjid, which is accessible to everybody. The Kashmiri Muslims live in Kathmandu and are engaged in business. The vast majority of them is educated and have careers in government and politics. At Indra Chowk, they usually sell potey (a type of bead/ornament used by Hindu married ladies). Other Muslims, such as Hindustani and Tibetans, also inhabit in those areas (Kunwar & Ojha, 2017). Their long history of living in Kathmandu contributed to a seamless integration of their culture and

language with the local Newar people. They communicate in the local Newari language. They do Namaz prayers but do not frequently visit the holy places. Their whole family relationship and religious activities are often restricted to the Kathmandu valley. The Kashmiri Muslims have maintained their separate identity for centuries following traditional liberalism.

B. Tibetan Muslims- Deobandhis: Tibetan Muslims are another community of Muslims in Nepal. Evidence suggests that some of them arrived as traders during the Malla period, but a substantial number of Tibetan Muslims arrived in Nepal as political refugees after 1960 A.D., along with their Buddhist counterparts (Bista, 1961). During the time of King Ratna Malla, Tibetan Muslims left Tibet and settled in northern Nepal, including Kathmandu (Khan, 2011). Their major source of income was through trading. They take part in Friday congregation and other religious events at the Jame Masjid on an equal basis. On socio-religious issues, however, they are mostly restricted to the Tibetan Muslim minority.

They still practice Tibetan culture and contact with Tibetan Buddhist families on a regular basis. They communicate in Tibetan with Tibetan Muslims but in Urdu with other Muslims (Khan, 2011). According to Fadzakir (2001), "there are roughly 30 Tibetan Muslim houses in Kathmandu." It is unknown how many Tibetan Muslims there are presently in Nepal, however one source estimates 300-400 people (Seddon, 2018). As a consequence of their extended presence in Kathmandu, their culture has merged with that of Kashmiris and Indian Muslims.

Their relationships with other Muslim groups, as well as regular engagement with the Masjid and other religious organizations, as well as participation in Islamic rites, all contributed to the preservation of their culture and identity as Muslims. They have excellent relationships with their counterparts in Darjeeling, Sikkim, and Tibet, as well as with the local people. They have formed marital relations with Kashmiri and local Muslims; however they do not want to marry their daughter to anybody other than Tibetan Muslims (Kunwar & Ojha, 2017). Most Tibetan Muslims follow the Deobandhi School attend Nepal Jame Masjid rather than Pancha Kashmiri Taquia (Musk for Baralevis). The Tibetan Muslims in Kathmandu belongs to the business. There is a good number of Tibetan Muslims in core city of Kathmandu with independent identity.

C. Indian Muslims – Deobandhis: Another group of Muslims, also known as Terai Muslims and Hindusthani Muslims, are the descendants of Indian migrants. Despite the fact that their reasons for migrating and the period of migration differed, they both came from India. They are as follows:

1. Hindusthani Muslims: In addition to Kashmiri and Tibetan Muslims, there is a small Muslim community in Kathmandu called as Hindusthani Muslims. The Muslims moved from India at various times, most notably under the Rana era. Clearly distinct from the preceding two waves of immigration in the 16th and 17th centuries is a much later group known as the Hindusthani Muslims (Seddon, 2018). They came to play as musicians at

Rana palaces. Other Indian Muslims who were distillers of alcoholic drinks and professionals in horse maintenance and riding, like them, moved in Kathmandu and were known as Hindusthani Muslims. They adhere to the Deobanhi School of Islam. Their number is very insignificant. They are not different to other Muslim groups in Nepal (Ojha, 2016).

2. **Terai Muslims:** Terai Muslims arrived in Nepal at various times in pursuit of jobs, particularly in the agricultural industry. They have relations in both the Terai and India. In religious beliefs and attitude, Terai Muslims vary from Kashmiri and Tibetan Muslims. They do not have the same liberal mentality as Kashmiris and Tibetan Muslims. As a result, they have founded a number of organizations to spread the proper word of Islam, strive for the Islamic way of life, and conduct life in accordance with the Quran. They keep their own social and cultural customs. They communicate in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Oudhi, and Urdu. Terai Muslims are bonded by a shared tie of Islam (Ojha, 2016).

Thus, Nepalese Muslims can be divided into three basic groupings based on indigenous traits and two categories based on belief systems. They should be classed as Kashmiri Muslims, Tibetan Muslims, and Indian Muslims, and their belief systems are Barelvis and Deobandhis.

Conclusion: Nepali Muslims were categorized on the base of their residence and work title. Foreign researchers who first focused on the study of Nepali Muslims categorized them without doing a comprehensive academic study or using a research method. Nepali respondents had no idea how to label Muslims in Hindu dominated society. Orthodox Hindu sentiment and Hindu civil code have classed Muslims as untouchables, and they are not permitted to engage with them. The foreign researchers classified Nepali Muslims based on the responses they received from people they met, the majority of whom were Hindus with little knowledge of the matter. The researchers have formed their own opinions and come to their own conclusions on the classification based on their findings hence became controversial on classifying Nepali Muslims. So re-categorization of Nepali Muslims reflects a new dimension in the study of Nepali Muslims.

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