



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-IX, Issue-IV, July 2021, Page No.184-195

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Factor Responsible for Religious Syncretism between Hindu-Muslim religious groups in Nepal

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Abstract:

In a country like Nepal where people are multi-religious, religious harmony is very important to maintain peace and stability. If religious harmony is not addressed, society could become in conflict. While Nepal is a secular Hindu dominant country, Muslims are an important and inseparable part of the community of Nepal. For the last 500 years, they have lived together with harmonious syncretism in Nepal.

During this time the Hindus and Muslims had negligible religious riots. The Nepalese Muslims have been socially recognized and integrated to become an inseparable part of society. But in recent years they have sought religiously to distinguish themselves and became a distinctive ethnic community.

This research is based on qualitative analysis, attempts to discuss the fundamental factors in the multi-religious society that contribute to religious harmony. In order to address the religious harmonic situation, Focus Group Discussion and library research methods are employed. This paper also highlights the important aspects of supporting religious harmony, including acceptance, understanding, cooperation, and law and justice. Likewise, mutual respect, social responsibility, opposing religious extremism and non-fundamentalism are other component for social harmony. The discussion was therefore intended in Nepal to build a sustainable concept of multi-religious harmony. The results could foster strong relations between them.

Keywords: Nepali Muslims, Religious Syncretism, Hindu-Muslim relations, Religious riots, Conflict, Acceptance.

1. Introduction: Heterogeneous religious groups are inhabited in Nepal. The religious composition of the Nepalese society is -Hindus-81.34%, Buddhists-9.04%, Islam-4.38%, Kirat-3.04%-, Christianity-1.41%, and others (2011 Census)

The total Muslim population is 1162370, according to the 2011 census. The 2011 census report says Muslims make up the third largest religious group, 4.38 percent of the total population. With more than 50% of the Muslim population, four Terai districts - Banke, Kapilbastu, Parsa, and Rautahat - are Muslim majority districts. The five districts- Bara,

Mahottarai, Dhanusa, Siraha and Sunsari are the second largest and Rupendehi and Sarlahi are the third Muslim majority districts (Census 2011). There is also a small Muslim population in the Kathmandu valley and in Hilly area. Muslim settlement in rural and urban area is surrounded by the Hindus. Though they have difference in religious belief and practice, they are sandwiched in such a way; no one can alienate them from the society. Muslims participate in Hindu feast and festivals and same things do the Hindus which is the beauty of Nepali society.

Statement of the Problem: Muslims came to Nepal at various times and settled in different geographical regions for different purposes. The Muslims live in Hindu dominated areas in Nepal, everywhere. It has a greater role to play in the promotion of religious harmony on their culture, social behavior, attitude, understanding and cooperation. Nepalese Muslims living in different locations held different views in the context of social and religious activities.

The Muslims in Kathmandu Valley and Hill Muslims are very liberal in socio-religious affairs whereas the Terai Muslims and Indians immigrants are strict and rigid in religious behavior with Hindu and other religious neighbors because of their easy access to the Indian religious institutions. Muslims, they never tried to penetrate the Hindu culture and religion in 500 years of history and the Hindus they never tried to overrule the Muslim culture and religion. For the examination of religious harmony, this general situation is important.

The researchers have not given Nepali Muslims adequate attention in order to study and have still not been academically studied. Certain articles, both national and international, have attempted to tackle religious harmony among the religious groups of Nepal, but not the whole. In this article some unspecified religious tolerance between Hindus and Muslims are identified.

Research Question: Many of the researchers mentioned in a review of literature raised so many such issues. Some areas that do not focus on those researches are addressed in this research.

The research attempts to answer the question below,

1. What is the social status of Nepali Muslims in the society?
2. What are the key factors for Hindu-Muslims religious harmony in Nepal?

Objective of the study:

Two main objectives were selected to present the study:

1. To identify the social status of Nepali Muslims.
2. To analyze the harmonic relations between Hindu- Muslims in the Nepali society.

2. Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework: It is rational to review previously published literature on various aspects of the Nepalese Muslims before proceeding to the issue under investigation. A comprehensive literature review certainly supports the identification of research problems, current situations and research gaps.

On such vague subject, in Nepal, except Gaborieau, Shanker Thapa, Abdul Salam Khan, Niranjan Ojha and David Seddon, researchers have not paid their attention. The Frenchman Marc Gaborieau, who visited and surveyed Muslim settlements in the western mountains extensively, has been the primary subject of the study and survey of Nepali Muslims. Since the early sixties of the 20th century, Gaborieau's work has begun Muslim studies in the Hindu state of Nepal. After then some native and foreign scholars started their work in this field. In identifying research problems academics and other researchers in Nepal have been found to be bias to Nepali Muslims.

Gaborieau (1977) "Minorities Musalmanes in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal" dealt primarily with the history of the Muslim minority in Nepal and its ethnography. Also, Gaborieau published numerous research papers on Muslims covering many topics, from the mountains to Terai. Those articles are - Les Musalman du Nepal, object et mondes (1966), Les curute du moyen Nepal place d'un groupe du musalman dans the society des castes (1966), Muslims in 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). His work was commendable but didn't cover the overall situation of Nepali Muslims.

In his book 'Nepal Ra Nepali Musalman,' Abdul Salam Khan (2071 B.S.) provides general information on the Nepalese Muslims. In essence, his book focuses on socio-economic status of Muslims of Kapilbastu .

David Seddon (2018), 'The Muslim Communities of Nepal' is based on field study report. It focuses on socio-cultural and political circumstances of Terai's Nepalese Muslims.

In their book "Nepali Muslims: Social, Historical and Economic Perspectives," Niranjan Ojha and D.S. Kunwar (2018) analyzes critically the history, social status and economic life of the Nepali Muslim community.

The work on Nepali Muslims was very significant to Shanker Thapa (1986). He has made incredible research in the field of Nepali Muslims in his contributions on "A study of population and family planning among the Muslims in Birjung" and "Caste Hierarchy among the Muslims" (1995). Nearly the entire Terai (Muslim) region was covered but he didn't cover the Hill Muslims as well as Muslim of Kathmandu. Before carrying out research all these published and unpublished references are reviewed.

Research Gap: The review of the literature is an important part to get theoretical framework, narrowing the subject, to analyze the current research situation and generation of research tools for further study. These varied subjects provide invaluable information on various aspects of Nepali Muslims but the cause behind the syncretic relation between Hindus- Muslim had not been addressed by the previous studies. Hence the research gap left by the previous studies has been taken as the research problem in this research.

Some articles, books and reports, nationally and internationally, have attempted to address the various aspects of Nepali Muslims but do not cover the current status of Nepali Muslims. These documents do not support the questions raised by the research, but serves to overcome theoretical differences. This article aims at identifying a number of unidentified

problems in general with Hindu-Muslim social harmony in Nepal. I therefore examined the literature available to study the gap in research.

Theoretical Frame work: The term "religion" describes different systems of faith and practice concerning what people determine to be sacred or spiritual (Durkheim 1915). Throw religious narratives, signs and traditions throughout history and societies around the world, aiming at giving more meaning to life and understanding the universe. In each known culture there is some form of religion, and it usually is practiced by a group in public. Religious practice may include festivals, marriage and funeral etc.

Émile Durkheim (1958- 1917) has described it as "things that exceed our knowledge" with the ethereal statement. Religion is "a unified system of convictions and practice in relation to holy things, that is, separating and prohibiting beliefs and practices which unite into one moral community. Some people associate religion with places of religious worship and others have a practice. He called religion a "unified system of religious beliefs and practices" (1915).

Thus, religious harmony can be viewed as a process, according to religion theories. A proper understanding of this process allows for a better understanding of the dynamism of religious harmony and allows for the identification of the main factors that influence religious syncretism as well as the selection of appropriate methods for their identification and assessment.

3. Methodology: This article is based on qualitative analysis. This research was accompanied by descriptive and informative methods. A focus group discussion (FGD) was carried out in order to gather information about the subject at first hand. Focused group discussion (FGD) was arranged on the above-mentioned subject for further discussion. There are three separate focused groups of scholars, university teachers and ordinary Muslims in which discussions have been conducted. Both formal and informal discussions were held with the concern stakeholders. The FGD representatives were Moulana Mohasin (Jame Masjid), Fazir Miya (Kashimree Taqia), Saukat Ali (University Professor), Akbar Khan (Businessman), Tara Devi, (Converted Muslim Lady), Tavail Ansari (Journalist), Atala Bhai (Former King's Cook) and Abdul majid (Civil Servant).

This research consists of present context data, but there are certain historical references in relevant places. Primary and secondary information is the fundamental source of information for this research. Basically, the method of library research is used for secondary information. The appropriate use of relevant books, journal articles, websites and related publications was made. For this research all of the information collected was classified, summarized, analyzed and reflected.

This study focuses on the study of historical relations between Hindu and Muslim peoples. The present study does not cover all aspects of Hindu-Muslim relations in social, political, judicial, economic and other areas.

4. Discussion: From the Latin word *religio* (respect for what is sacred) and *religare* (to bind, in the sense of an obligation), the term religion was derived and it describes various

systems of belief and practice concerning what people determine to be sacred or spiritual (Durkheim, 1915).

While some people think of religion as something individual because religious beliefs can be highly personal, religion is also a social institution. Social scientists recognize that religion exists as an organized and integrated set of beliefs, behaviors, and norms centered on basic social needs and values.

Nepal is home to many casts, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups, a small Himalayan country. Nepal's majority inhabitants are Hindu. There are also others who live as minorities in Nepal.

If we look at the population of Nepal, there are specific ethnic groups in different geographic regions. The Himalayan region is inhabited by the Mongoloid race, while the Terai is occupied by plane casts and the tribes. The valley of Kathmandu is made up of all the tribes, ethnic groups and religious groups. On the south side of the country, a majority of the Muslim population lives. They live from east to west in both rural and urban areas. They have a good number in this region. Considering Muslims, a small number of Muslims live in the Hilly areas and in Kathmandu as a distinctive religious group (CBS 2011).

According to the 2011 census, the total Muslim population is 1162370. Muslims constitute 4.38% of the total population (Census 2011). The figure claimed by the Muslim organizations (8-10%) is much more than the census data. Speedy migration from the Indian plane to the Terai considerably contributed to this increase. The movement from the Indian plane to the Terai is steady and consistent. Four districts of the Terai, namely Banke, Kapilbastu, Parsa and Rautahat with over 50% of the Muslim population, are now Muslim – majority districts. The five districts, namely Bara, Mahottarai, Dhanusa, Siraha and Sunsari are the second Muslim majority districts and the two districts, Rupendehi and Sarlahi, constitute a significant third religious group (CBS: 2011:34). Kathmandu Capital of Nepal contributes to a 21866 Muslim population, which is 1.25% of the Kathmandu population (www.nmc.gov.np).

History of Muslim Settlement in Nepal: Historically, it is difficult to come to any conclusion about Muslim settlement in Nepal. Historical evidence supports the fact that Nepal and Arabia have certain trade relations (Regmi: 2026:150). In 1324, for the first time in history, Muslims entered Nepal. It wasn't a migration. In the year 1324 A.D. Gaysuddhin Tuglak entered Simraungarh when he was returning from Calcutta to Delhi. In the year 1349 A.D., another Muslim ruler, the Sultan of Bengal, Samasuddhin Ilyas, invaded the Kathmandu Valley (Banu: 1980:23). This was neither migration nor immigration, just an invasion. Later, they returned.

The first arriving Muslims in Nepal were the Kashmiree merchants. They came to Nepal via Laddhak and Tibet during the reign of King Ratna Malla, the ruler of Kathmandu who invited them. This marked the beginning of the history of the Muslim population in Kathmandu. The main purpose of their arrival was to trade in Nepal (Subedi: 2040:11). The second batch of Muslims came to Nepal, particularly Kathmandu during the reign of King Pratap Malla of Kathmandu in the 17th century; they are the Hindusthani Muslims

(Gaborieau: 1981:199-200). The third batch came to Nepal during the reign of Bhaskar Malla (1700-1722 A.D.). The fourth batch entered at the time of Jaya Praksh Malla, the last Malla King. King Prithivi Narayan Shah, the ruler of Gorkha, had also invited Muslim arms experts from India. Likewise, King Ram Shah of Gorkha invited Muslims to settle in Gorkha. All those Muslims who settled in remote hill villages and began selling bangles are now known as Churauteys. Similarly, King Mahodatta Sen of Palpa invited Muslim arms experts from India. Likely, King Damodar Sen of Tanahun also invited Muslims from Oudh (Ojha: 2018:4).

Later, they settled in different parts of Nepal, including the Kathmandu valley. The majority of Muslims arrived in Nepal during and after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 A.D. (Indian historians claim it was the first independent movement). Jung Bahadur Rana gave protection and shelter to the Begum Hazrat Mahal, Begum of Oudh. Knowing about the migration of Begum, the Muslims from the Indian border area started migration to the Terai region of Nepal. Because of geographical reasons and malaria, hill people were not very much interested in migrating to the Terai. That's why Indians were encouraged to immigrate. So, a considerable number of Muslim farmers come to this region. In this way, Muslims came to Nepal and permanently settled here (Ojha: 2016:103). Until the reign of Ratna Malla, Muslims were not permanently settled in Nepal. Now one should be clear that Muslims were invited to Nepal to settle here. They didn't come here as invaders. In other Asian countries, especially in India (the then India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), they come as invaders. They ruled India for centuries. They settled there as winners and other religious people who were defeated (the losers) they were ruled by the Muslims in their country. This is the basic difference between Nepali Muslim settlements and other countries' Muslim settlements. This is the major cause for peace and harmony between Hindu-Muslim religious groups.

Classification of Nepali Muslims: Because of the differences in belief, Nepali Muslims are also divided into the Sunni and the Shias. In Nepal an overwhelming majority of the Muslims belong to the Sunni sect. Shias are insignificant in population. The Sunni's they themselves splited into different sub-sects because of the variations in belief on aspects of religion as other countries. Some refer to Muslim mystics, the Sufis, as a sect of Islam. They are however, considered as Sunni (Thapa: 1995:55). So, as far as the Muslim society of Nepal is concerned, the entire belief system is borrowed from their counterparts in India. A large number of Nepali Muslims are either trained or influenced by the Deoband School but some Muslims have an influence of Barelvi School though they are very few in number these days. Fajir Miya, Chief of Kashmiree Taquia said that before few decades Barelvi School used to be a major school and their followers were in majority in Nepal. When speedy migration took place from Indian plane, most of the Barelvees were converted into Deobandi because Barelvi they don't have easy access to religious school and scholars in India comparing Deobandi.

Many native and foreign scholars had classified Nepali Muslims into different groups according to their residential status. Abdul Salam Khan (2071 B.S.) in his book "Nepal ra

Nepali Musalman” has classified Nepali Muslims into five categories , David Seddon(2018) in his book “The Muslim Communities of Nepal” has classified them into Six categories. They have classified Nepali Muslims according to their residential status not their indigenous features. According to their indigenous features they can be classified only into three categories (Ojha, 2018). Thus, the Muslims of Nepal are mainly divided into three major groups according to their indigenous features. They are- The Kashmiree, Tibetan Muslims and Indian Muslims.

Social Harmony between Hindu- Muslim in Nepal: Nepal is a Hindu dominant secular state (declared by the constitution of Nepal 2015). Nepali legal system is uniform to all Nepali citizens. There is no separate law for religious or ethnic groups as in India. Religious freedom is granted to people (Siwakoti, 2072). There are various such laws and regulations which are not compatible with the Islamic culture. Laws extracted from the Hindu jurisprudence are neither friendly nor hostile to the Islamic culture but the state never discriminated them. They have opportunities to hold government positions, participate in political activities, practice religion and so forth.

The Muslims of Nepal living in different places held both liberal and rigid attitude in religious matter. Usually, the hill Muslims, the Kashmirees and Tibetan Muslims in Kathmandu and hill settlement are very liberal in religious matters whereas Terai Muslims or Indian immigrants are found to be very rigid in religious matters. Even in that situation, the process of religious modernization has brought perceptible change in their attitude (Ojha, 2011).

Religious syncretism between Hindu and Islam is clearly visible in Nepal. It may be interesting to note that even after their long presence in Nepal during the Monarchy there was hardly any significance of communal problem in Nepal. Muslims, the third religious groups in Nepal were allowed to practice their faith under certain restrictions. They were debarred from propagation of Islam or to follow Islamic code Shariat. It is something amazing to see how this significant number of followers of Islam compromised with anti-Shariat (Islamic laws) un-Islamic Hindu environment and lived here peacefully for centuries.

Factors responsible for Religious harmony:

Broad mind Concept

Only when religious differences are recognized and diversity and differences in culture and faith are respected, does harmony develop. Muslims in Nepal are free to exercise their faith without harming others. Muslims were respected in society during 500 years, even in high-level political appointments.

Arrival

Religious harmony is primarily due to their arrival in Nepal. It is worth noting that Muslims were not invaders but guests in Nepal. They were invited by Nepalese rulers to settle here. In Nepal, we have a culture of visitor respect—Atithi Devo Bhawa, which means "the Guests are Gods." In the Nepalese society, Muslims were treated as guests. That is why

society has given them respect and has never attempted on the basis of their belief system to discriminate against them. Thus, they blended in the society.

Social Acceptance

According to the Hindu jurisprudence Muslims were in the category of untouchable and impure caste. Only "raw and dry" eatables were acceptable from their hands, but during the Monarchical system, the King used to call Muslim Cook at his Friday family party in the palace. The Nepali King was represented as an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu in society. A Hindu King gave such respect to the Muslim community which was an ice-break in the orthodox Hindu society. It is done just for religious harmony (discussion with Atala Bhai-Muslim Cook). These days, Hindus rush to Muslim restaurants for delicious food. Muslim food (Halal food), nowadays, is much more popular than the common food.

Social Respect

During the 18th century, Mahindra Singh Malla invited a Muslim Ustad (singer) to his palace (Subedi: 2074: Ca) and he was granted a high level post in his palace. King Rana Bahdur Shah had appointed Kaiyum Kha Kalwar as the Royal vocalist. He had appointed Jivan Shah Kalwar and Bhawani Shah Kalwar as music-dance department heads (Subedi: 2074: Ca). Rank position granted to Muslims is a sign of social respect.

Religious Recognition

Narayanapur, in Banke district, is the place where Hindu-Muslims coincide together. Majar of Khalipha Nur Ahmad Shah and Majar of Hajrat Baba Kammar Shah, Muslim majar, are the sacred place for Hindus where Hindus offer blankets (Chadar) and Muslims pray in Musbetwa Baba temple, a Hindu temple. Religiously, Hindus and Muslims both gave equally recognition to their religion and accepted each other as an inseparable part of society (BBC, Feb 2021).

Co-operation

The element of co-operation is very important for building good relations between religious groups. With the existence of this element in their life, they will respect and tolerate other religions. Co-operation can be seen through their action by respecting the celebrations, rituals as well as beliefs of other religious matters in their community. Both Hindus and Muslims in Terai celebrate Chhat as their own festival.

Constitutional Right

The Constitution of Nepal has granted equal rights to Muslims without discriminating against them as a minority. Muslims enjoy equal rights such as civil rights, political rights, right to freedom, property rights like their Hindu counterparts from the very beginning. Muslims have even held high offices. The percentage is not disheartening. Many of the prominent Muslims are members of parliament, ministers, civil servants of higher status, professors, lawyers, scientists, medical practitioners, engineers and so on. They have equally contributed to nation building.

Government Policy

The government took account of the welfare of Muslims and protection of their religious rights. The Home Ministry always manages the Haj pilgrimage safely and easily with financial support. The Muslims Commission, a constitutional body, has been formed for the

welfare of Muslims. Muslims are getting reservations for official appointments, education and so on. Though Nepal is a declared secular state, there is no separate law (Shariat) and Muslim Personal Law board for Muslims considering them equal.

Religious Protection

Kashmiree Taqia and Nepali Musk (Jame Masjid) are very close to the King's Palace (about 300 meters) in the core city surrounded by the Hindu temples, which is an example of state policy for religious protection.

These are a few examples of the Nepali Hindu rulers that have accepted Muslims as their own citizens and granted them high official value. They never tried to discriminate against Muslims because of their religious beliefs. Though Muslims and Hindus are very different in religious matters, Nepali Muslims and Hindus both participate in Hindu festivals and vice-versa. Some Muslims, after the promulgation of the secular constitution, are demanding a Hindu state as before.

Research limitations

The research is limited to Nepal in general and specifically to Kathmandu. Only 8 respondents for the FGD were presented in the discussion. More districts and respondents could be added for future reference. It is suggested to add more cities for further research, and if possible to conduct the examination in another country, to better understand the behavior of the person. In this study Emile Durkheim's sociological theory of religion was employed and in future research more theories can be used to better understand the harmony of the religion. In addition, research on such a vague subject to better understand the result is highly recommended.

Conclusion: It is important to note, for national development, that it is extremely important to live in harmonious society without conflicts and tension. Nobody would like to be living in tension, conflict, and war in this world. For the creation of a harmonious society, it is therefore essential to strengthening unity and solidarity between religious groups. The basis on trust and mutual respect among multiple religious groups should be builded inter-religious harmony.

Nepalese leaders (during absolute Monarchy, Constitutional Monarchy and Republican) never adopted policies that were opposed to the welfare and existence of Muslims. The Nepalese Muslims have lived with their Hindu and other neighbors over the centuries, in harmonious syncretism. Nepalese Muslims never tried, even after the declaration of a secular constitution, to differentiate them as separate religious groups. However, rather than secularism, they are demanding a Hindu State. In Hindu Nepal, they claimed to be safe and have a far better life than now. But in recent years after the declaration of the Democratic Federal Republic of Nepal, some Muslim leaders, influenced by their closer counterparts, tried to challenge the centuries-old peace and harmony. During the process, they underwent political cultivation and emerged as a distinct religious group. The number is very few but their intention is hazardous. Through Constitutional rights, Muslim religious organizations have challenged their century-old subordinate status. This has led to a common conflict in some areas of Terai (Border to India), where Muslims have a competitive strength that is not a good sign for peace and harmony in multi-religious society of Nepal.

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FGD with Atala Bhai, Fajir Miya, Akbar Khan, Tara Devi and Maulana Mohasin on 20 March 2020.