

# Muslims Cultural and Religious Practices as a Minority Group in Nepal

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**Abstract.** Muslims are a small but fast growing community in the world's only Hindu state Nepal where they are considered as Indian migrants and their descendants. This paper addressed the present condition of the Muslim community's cultural and religious practices as a minority group in Nepal. It has tried to illustrate the real scenario of this community's challenges whether they have or not and social supports and cooperation to practicing their cultural and religious rituals. This research work has followed interpretive case study under qualitative approaches where purposefully research participants have been chosen to dig out the actual picture on this religious group where the study area was Balkumari area, Lalitpur Sub Metropolitan City, Kathmandu Valley.

However, it has revealed that Nepalese Muslims are practicing their cultural and religious orders, rituals and traditions under some State provided restrictions like performing missionary activities, slaughtering cows, restricted to polygamy under some conditions given in the Holy Quran. They have the privileges to follow their religious order in proper way with full spirits and traditions maintaining that few imposed restrictions. Other non-Muslims communities support them to celebrate and enjoy their occasions by attending their home. This study has found some remarkable issues like still practicing untouchability by certain non-Muslims groups, challenges like lack of burial ground to bury dead bodies, open liquor drinking practices and lack of acknowledgement of holidays in their special and important days of religious festivals.

**Keywords:** Muslim Cultural and Religious Practices, Minority Group, Nepal.

## 1. Introduction

Equality in opportunities of life is fundamental human rights that have declared by a number of international agencies and conventions of all categories of people living in all parts of the world. This concern shown in many places of the world by the international community and related voices raised by civil societies are not taken seriously. People in many parts of the world still suffers from the problem of discriminatory practices on the grounds of their race, color, creed, caste, gender, and ethnicity (Pandey et al., 2006). In some societies, the law and constitutions themselves may endorse discriminatory practices (ibid). They may tolerate differences in rights to property, to citizenship, to vote and participate in the electoral process, to follow religious beliefs and practices, and so forth among people of different social categories. People from minorities may feel discriminatory against due to the poor representation of their group in social, political, and economic spheres of society. Cultural traditions may add to social discrimination by assigning different roles, responsibilities, and privileges to different categories of the population (ibid). Nepal is a land of ethnic diversity and the size of these different ethnic groups ranges from few hundred to several hundred thousand.

Nepal is a land of ethnic diversity and the size of these different ethnic groups ranges from few hundred to several hundred thousand. Therefore, some are in majority, while large numbers of them are in minority (ibid). There are several minority groups in Nepal; most of them are underprivileged and underdeveloped (Thapa, 2000). Social development implies the developments of all segments of the country's population. This necessitates the socio-cultural growth of the disadvantaged and backward communities. The Muslim in Nepal possessed a rich cultural heritage, but they lag behind in educational development and lack of participation in social activities in general with reference to other major communities and existence of wide disparity between male and female Muslim population in particular stay behind them from development.

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Muslims in Nepal are comprised of Indian migrants and their descendants. A large majority of them live in the southern plain areas, while a certain percentage of the Muslim population live in certain villages of the hill districts and the Kathmandu Valley (Thapa, 2000). This geographic range has a profound impact on their lifestyles, cultural activities and even their religious practices. The Muslims of Nepal are categorically divided into different ethnic types, distinguishable by religious behaviors, language, beliefs, and relations with the local Hindus (ibid). According to Salam.A, (2007), The Muslim in Nepal, particularly in Kathmandu and others parts of Nepal roughly divided into five groups. They are Kashmiri Muslims, Indian Muslims, Tibetan Muslims, Tarai(plain land) Muslims and hill Muslims.

There are very few research have done on the rights, status of cultural and religious practices, access on decision making at government level of Muslims and their role in the national development. At the same time, Nepal Government has not ever given concentration to bring the Muslims in the main countries stream (Muslims). They do not support the Madrasa (religious place for education) financially and morally which is playing a significant role to educate the Muslim people and helping the nation to reach literacy rate 53.7% (Muslims). Therefore, the government should bring them in the main stream while constructing the new Constitution of the country for pathway and the betterment of the country people. Taking into consideration of all the aspects that they have faced in their everyday life should be study so that concern authorities, policy makers as well as local government be able to get an idea regarding one of the excluded minority group of the country which will help them to move one step ahead towards democracy practices in the country. This inclined me to do the study on the Muslim community of Balkumari area, Lalitpur Sub-metropolitan City , Kathmandu Valley, Nepal which is one of the largest Hindu state of the world.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Discrimination has started from the constitution to the regular life style of the people. It recognizes that Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and democratic country, at the same time it also defines Nepal as Hindu state. Though , it is true that the majority of the population of Nepal follows Hinduism , but according to 2001 population census has reported that 80.6% of the population is Hindu, 10.2% are Buddhist , 4.3% Islam ,and 3.6 % Kirant and a significant number are Jains and Christians (Pandey el at., 2006). In addition to this, the member of the above mentioned religious communities have been gradually increasing in the past few decades. The state provides long Holidays for the celebration of festivals based on Hindu religion (ibid), with the exception of a one day holiday for Muslims on Eid-ul-Azha (Bakri Id), it does not provide a similar types of recognition of the festivals and ceremonies practiced by ethnic groups and other religious communities. Considering stated above Muslim as a minority religious group might have faced different problems in their cultural and religious practices which have a great influence on their regular life. To realize the status of their practices in their daily life as well as their adjustment and living in the changing condition of the country. Therefore a comparative study is needed for knowing the condition of Muslim people of their cultural and religious aspects in the diverse social conditions. These gives rise to the question of the actual status of the Muslim people in the different caste, class and ethnic communities. Guided by the above-mentioned issues, this study focused on finding the answers of the following queries: To identify the present condition of Muslims' cultural and religious practices in Nepal and to explore the challenges whether they have /not faced in religious and cultural practices. This study has done based on the following research questions 1.What are the challenges and perception they hold as a minority group? 2. What are the challenges Muslim people face to their cultural and religious practices? 3. How are Muslims coping with other cultural people in the changing urban setting?

This research work followed interpretive research paradigm under qualitative approach where case study is considered as research method. In- depth interview and observation were two data collection tools and for data analysis and interpretation coding and thematic analysis had followed for making the collected information in a meaningful unit. Major finding are discussed according to the themes.

## **3. Major Findings**

For construct the meaningful sense of the gathered information thematic analysis has been done for reveal the real scenario of this community which is discussed accordingly.

### **3.1. Challenges and Perceptions as a Minority Group**

Exploring the information collected from the respondents found that Muslim people thought like other ethnic and religious groups means they have the same rights and privilege to practices all the festivals and they are doing so, according to the imposed laws of this country. They can celebrate and enjoy all kinds of cultural and religious rituals under certain restrictions like they cannot perform any missionary activities inside the country, slaughtering animals like cows and practices marriage and divorce rules according to the given condition of the holy book Quran which have followed as descendants. Another challenge is that though alcohol taking is a culture of certain ethnic groups in Nepal; it is a challenge for Muslims to follow their religious order because it is totally restricted in their religion. In some cases still they are considered as a lower caste and untouchable which is the reflection of humiliation of human rights. Inside Kathmandu Valley there are only two graveyards or burial ground that made problem for them to bury dead bodies.

### **3.2. Challenges of Religious and Cultural Practices**

They can celebrate each festival with full spirit and every required thing is available in market to keep up their rituals. They invite non-Muslim friends and neighbors in their two important and biggest celebrations Eid-ul -Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha and they enjoy it with full enthusiasm. Though it is Hindu country it is restricted to sacrificing animals (Cows) which is a ritual of Eid- ul- Azha locally known as Bakri –Id. State provides long Holidays for the celebration of festivals based on Hindu religion with the exception of a one day holiday for Muslims on Eid-ul-Azha (Bakri Id), it does not provide a similar type of recognition of the festivals and ceremonies practiced by this community which is a serious problem for them to follow their religious customs and rituals according to the participants.

### **3.3. Coping with Other Cultural Groups**

With the pace of changing society and its need like others they are not involved in any decision making assembly but they need permission from the local authorities for doing any gathering associated with religion and its tradition. However, they get support from their community and they are celebrating their major festivals with full spirits and traditions. In case of others cultural groups if they (Non-Muslim people) are invited, they (Muslim people) also go to non-Muslims house to join their festivals to make their festivals livelier.

## **4. Summary and Implications**

Nepalese Muslims' enjoy religious and other rights and are allowed to perform acts considered as duty in their own religion and the tradition of their family. In fact, no major restrictions are imposed on their religious practices. Muslims have been living in different parts of Nepal among various communities of different religious faiths for the past five centuries with harmony and peace. Major problems of the Nepalese Muslims are illiteracy, poverty and lower standard of living. Considering the Muslim community as backward, some efforts of the government of Nepal are need to improve, like Muslims of Nepal are not given the right to practice Islamic personal law, because there are no such laws in the country whereas Muslims believe on total submission to the will of God and complete obedience to the law of God, which is defined by Quran. They should give the permission to follow the Islamic laws according to Quran and its law with case basis; not like non Islamic rules regarding marriage, divorce and some cultural rituals in the way of Allah during the month of Ramadan and others.

The Nepali Muslims are free to follow their religion maintaining imposed restrictions set by the state. Therefore Muslims in Nepal take pleasure in belonging to Islam as Nepali and they are proud of it. But these Muslim also have not changed their thoughts and still concentrated on religion. They are so engaged with religion that at the bottom of all their ideas there is religions motives either above or below the surface that has both good and bad sides. Islamic culture is nothing but the practical and realistic expression of the religion of Islam ordered by The Holy Quran where all human being are treated equal and all have the rights to follow their own religion without interruption. It is the religion of understanding and invitation of people to follow the true and accurate path of life by maintaining and upholding the rules and restrictions provided by the Divine Holy book The Quran.

Thus for moving towards a smooth democracy, holding its multiple cultural and religious traditions and balancing the state's duty to treat and protect its citizens equally and to ensure the rights of religious freedom as well as certain cultural rights in an effective manner, would be an example for the world. This study tried to portray the present condition of minority Muslim religious group's cultural and religious practices where it has found a better and comparatively satisfactory position in the country. Moreover government should considered Muslim community as an important part of the country and preserve of friendly feelings and harmony between the different acts of religion. Nepali Muslims enjoy religious and other rights with satisfaction. They are allowed to perform practices considered as duty in their own religion and the tradition of their family. In fact, no major restrictions are imposed on their religious practices. Muslims have been living in different parts of Nepal among various communities of different ethnic and religious faiths and facing similar difficulties like other minority groups which are normally taken as Nepali; and with this they are living for the past five centuries with harmony and peace. The Nepali Muslims though in a Hindu democratic country are free to follow their religion and culture. So, Muslims in Nepal take pleasure in belonging to Islam as Nepali and they are proud of it.

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