

## Practice of Caste Hierarchy in Nepali Muslim Society

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Received: 12th October, 2022; Accepted: 19th November, 2022; Published : June, 2023

### Abstract

*A nation like Nepal, where Hindus make up the bulk of the population, places a greater emphasis on the study of religious minorities. Caste is a distinctive type of stratification. It is purely a Hindu phenomenon that is comprehensible and explicable in terms of Hindu principles and justifications. In addition to the Indian subcontinent, caste is widespread in the Arab world, Polynesia, North and East Africa, Japan, and North America. Like in the Hindu community, there is caste purity and practice of hierarchy in Muslim community. Saiyedism in Muslims society (the Arab domination) like Brahminism in Hindu society is a primary cause of caste prejudice in the Muslim community.*

*This paper outlines the crucial steps that must be completed at each stage of the caste hierarchy and is based on qualitative research. The subject is being generalized through an observational technique, in-depth interviews, and library research. Muslim scholars and elderly persons who had experienced such practice were picked as the respondents for the purpose of learning more. The respondents are identified as Res.1, Res.2, Res.3, and so forth because they requested anonymity. The Muslim caste hierarchical system in Nepal is the area of this study. It tries to combat the issue of caste hierarchy among Muslim people in Nepal.*

**Keywords :** Hindus- Conversion-Saiyed- Untouchables- prejudice- hierarchy.

### Introduction

Two fundamental concepts, such as God's unity and humanity's fraternity, serve as the foundation of Islam(Res. 1). All of mankind is Allah's family, and the dearest of them in Allah's sight is one who provides the most assistance to his family, the Prophet further declared (Faridi and Siddiqi, 1992). Islam does not, in theory, distinguish between different types of men. In their mosques during prayer, there is typically no distinction, at least. Islam disapproves of the concepts of ceremony, purity, and contamination (Res.2). But as the idea of untouchability spread, caste in Muslim society became more developed. The caste system is a deeply ingrained institution in Indian civilization, and as such, it has influenced non-Hindu communities' social structures as well. Caste or traits like caste exist among Muslims and other religious groups, which contrasts with Islamic brotherhood and egalitarianism (Madelbaum,1910).

Despite the shared characteristics of Hindu and Muslim caste systems, Muslim castes completely lack the conceptual and ethical foundation that Hindu cosmologies offer for the existence of classes. Clearly, within their social system, caste characteristics have emerged. The Hindu practices have an acculturative effect. The pre-conversion caste characteristics of the Hindu were carried over, particularly in the schedule caste people and OBC, who are called in India as Pasmanda Muslims (Res.3). Similar to this, Indian

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Muslims of non-Indian origin have absorbed caste-related traits. However, the current pressures of modernization and the progress of islamization prompted caste dissolution to occur. No comprehensive research on Nepali Muslims has been published, with the exception of Shanker Thapa, Abdul Salam Khan, Niranjana Ojha, Saumya Parmarthi and Manu Gupta, Quraisha Banu and Charles Taylor. So far, all available works are in the form of research publications. All of these sources are assessed before commencing the inquiry. Academics and other researchers have not prioritized the theme of practice of caste hierarchy in Nepali Muslim society. These are generic studies that do not discuss on the caste stratification in Nepali Muslim society. All of these literatures are evaluated prior to doing research.

Abdul Salam Khan (2071 B.S.) provides background knowledge on Nepali Muslims in his book "Nepal Ra Nepali Musalman." The socioeconomic standing of Nepali Muslims in Kapilbastu is the main topic of his work. His work does not include Muslim caste system in his book. In their book "Our Nation and its Women," Saumya Parmarthi and Manu Gupta (2014) discuss the problems of women in India, particularly those who belong to the Muslim minority. Additionally, it discusses social injustices including gender, domestic violence against Muslim women committed in the name of personal laws, and the emancipation of women through legal means but don't deal with caste system. A notable study on marriage and divorce was carried out by Shanker Thapa in his research paper "Marriage in the Muslim society: A case study of Brigunjabased Muslims" (1985). Based on a microanalysis of Muslim settlements in Birgunj, this study was created. The raised research issue is not covered; instead, it concentrates on the history of Nepali Muslims as well as the practice of Nikah and Talaq as well as caste stratification among the Muslims. In her master's thesis, "Introduction to Muslims in Nepal," Quraisha Banu (1980) offers an educational and general insight of Nepali Muslims. The social structure, religion, status of women, and family life of Kathmandu's Muslims are all topics included in this study's historical analysis. It also fails to address the study question posed regarding Muslim caste hierarchy in Nepal.

These works of literature are useful for coming up with ideas and detecting problems with research. It offers suggestions for further research and aids in assessing the state of the field's understanding of Muslim behavior of Nepal. The broad characteristics of caste hierarchical system and its application in Nepal are not covered, although it is useful for building research tools for subsequent studies. The aforementioned national and international research, books, and publications made an effort to examine various aspects of Muslim society, but they were unable to provide a complete picture. These texts do not provide evidence for the study's research problem, but they do offer some insight into how the Muslim caste system might be conceptualized. This article aims to point out some previously unrecognized shortcomings in Muslim caste system in general, so that I could investigate the research problem. I looked at the body of existing literature. Numerous researchers who are mentioned in the literature review have found answers to many of the issues. This study focuses on a few topics that were left out of earlier investigations. The following questions are the focus of the research.

- What precisely is the origin of Muslim caste system in Nepal?
- In Nepal, how is the Muslim caste hierarchical system now being practiced?

Two key goals were chosen in order to present the study:

- To understand the concept of the emergence of Islamic caste system in Nepal.
- To look into how Nepali Muslims handle caste hierarchy.

### **Methodology**

This paper underlies the qualitative research approach. In this study, explanatory, descriptive, analytical, and informative methods were all applied. There were formal and informal in-depth interviews with the stakeholders in the issue. Although certain historical references are given at the proper times, this research mostly uses data from the present context. Primary data is the main source of information for this study. The necessary amount of published books, journal articles, online resources, and publications has been utilized. For this research, all of the data was categorized, summarized, analyzed, and some reflection was done. This research is restricted to a historical examination of caste systems of Nepali Muslims. The social, political, legal, economic, and other facets of Muslim caste system are not included in this paper.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Conceptualization of Caste system**

Ethnocentrism is one of the key characteristics of all major world religions. The basic characteristic of Islam is universalism, which means that it does not draw a radical division between Muslims and non-Muslims. When it comes to concentrated beliefs, there is no discrimination made based on class, race, status, or place of birth. However, piety or fear of Allah is the sole distinction that has so far been acknowledged. Caste is a distinctive type of stratification (Faridi & Siddiqi, 1992). In terms of caste, sociologists hold two opposing ideas. The first thing to note is that caste is a Purely Hindu phenomenon that may be clarified and understood in terms of Hindu principles and justifications. According to the opposing viewpoint, the structural feature of society is caste. In addition to the Indian Subcontinent, caste is widespread in the Arab world, Polynesia, North and East Africa, Guatemala, Japan, and Native Americans in North America.

The system to which it belonged produced the caste phenomenon. It has a close relationship with a number of particular objectives that it works to achieve. The shape and the premise of caste are two crucial components. It has a number of features that are immediately noticeable because it is a form (Berrman, 1968). On the other hand, a caste is then recognized or described based on its characteristics. For instance, a caste generally has a common name, descends, occupational specialties, practices endogamous marriages, and develops a unique sub-culture inside their own society. Hinduism holds that because souls are immortal, they can change and re-change bodies depending on how well one does their obligations. According to Hindu philosophy, a man's birth in a certain group is therefore not a matter of chance, but rather results from the merit he acquires by performing his tasks. Caste is defined in several ways by social historians and other academics. Castes are ranked and organized in a hierarchical manner (Thapa, 1995).

## **Caste Hierarchical Structure of Nepali Muslims**

In Hindu civilization, caste has so played a significant role. However, it has an impact on Muslim societies as well, extending beyond the confinement of just Hindu society. There are several similarities between the inter-ethnic stratification of Muslims in Nepal and Northern India. Nepali Muslims caste hierarchical structure can be found in the highlands, Tarai, and Kathmandu (Thapa, 1997). It is academically more important to analyze the Quran's rule of equality and brotherhood among the Muslim communities before evaluating how caste-like aspects act among the many regional and other groupings of Muslims in Nepal.

Islam is a religion that is built on egalitarianism. So, a man's rank in society is not determined by the frequency of his birth. The fundamental principles of Islam are in opposition to the caste system. As a result, Islam does not recognize any type of social stratification, differentiation, or discrimination based on factors such as birth, image-related material gain, occupation, wealth, or matrimony. All people are treated equally regardless of their social or ethnic background. The followers share the same benefits and together they constitute the global brotherhood. Any form of caste prejudice in human society is prohibited by Islam. The holy Quran makes numerous mentions of egalitarianism and opposition to social discrimination (Quran 19:13.,N/D). Islam rejects all forms of superiority. Islam values equality among its adherents and, as a result, judges people according to their decency and the extent to which they place their faith in Islam, rather than their race, nationality, or lineage. The equality of all people, the concept of world brotherhood, and fraternity were highly valued by the Prophet Muhammad. Along with it, he declared, "Neither a non-Arab nor an Arab is superior to the other (Quran 49:10.,N/D).. Islam increasingly absorbed aspects and tenets of other cultures as it was brought outside the borders of Arabia and exposed to them. Caste categories are used to classify Muslims in India.

According to sociologists, caste among Muslims is based on cultural or structural characteristics of Hindus. Some scholars' findings indicated that Muslim civilization has adopted the caste system in the Hindu tradition. This viewpoint was advanced by Gaus Ansari (Ansari, 1967). In terms of social and cultural behavior, Muslims exhibit some caste-related traits such as endogamy, hierarchical organization, and caste-based council. The Gotra (clanname) practice, which is common in Hindu society, is also found in some Muslim groups. The idea of social differentiation and stratification among Muslims is greatly supported by this type of practice. Muslim subgroups are classified based on age, money, employment, and level of religiosity, but they are not always ranked in the same manner as Hindu castes (Ahmad, 1993).

According to Islamic law Humans are not thus the target of any discrimination. Therefore, Islam does not acknowledge distinctions based on race, class, or even caste. Nobody has an upper or lower limit. Nobody has the power to pollute someone just by touching them (Res.1). On the basis of societal factors, there is no concept of purity and pollution. Similar to this, there are no highs or lows in marriage, commensality, or other relationships. Therefore, no one is discriminated against because of their natal employment (Res.1). Therefore, the prevalence of characteristics that are similar to castes is predicated more on its practical aspect. The Muslims of Northern India, including Nepal, however, continue to have a positive view of caste despite this scenario.

Both endogamy and hierarchical hierarchies are features of Muslim society. Hindus who use the caste system are endogamous people. Hindus practice endogamy primarily to preserve the sanity and purity of their blood, which helps to preserve the group's distinctive chastity.

The responsibilities that have already been allocated, however, establish the superiority and inferiority as well as the purity and contamination of a certain caste. As a result, the Brahman Kshetriya, Vaishya and Sudra castes execute unique occupations (Res.3). They are specialized in their occupations. A Brahmin always serves the gods and is therefore considered sacred. To achieve perfection of personality and purity of mind and soul within the Hindu philosophical framework, on the other hand, they must engage in meditation or other Hindu rituals as well as interaction and intermixing with those of modest endowment.

The Sudras are positioned at the bottom of the caste system. Since they are of lower quality, they work in jobs that reflect their position. The strata of Brahman and Sudras are separated by the Kshetriyas and Vaishyas (Res.2). If they mix with people of lower strata and poorer quality, the attributes of upper strata cannot be preserved. By causing relative social effects, it progressively taints their blood. Ashraf Arzal, as it is practiced by Muslims in India and Nepal, is a feudal idea and a byproduct of the feudalistic social structure of medieval India. Because they are of foreign descent and are members of the ruling classes, the Ashraf see themselves as the higher caste among Muslims. Thus, they continue to enjoy social dominance. All other Muslims are classified as Ashaf and Arzal, which is a lower status than Ashraf.

Muslim caste division differs from Hindu caste division in terms of status, privileges, rights, and duties, the caste syndrome in Muslim society cannot be compared to that of the Hindus (Faridi, and Siddiqi, 1992). The remaining low castes are included in the Ajlaf, which is Arabic for "unholy" or "degraded." Ashraf class includes Saiyad, Seikh, Mughal, and Pathan. The Arzal, which also includes the Mansuri, Churihar, Manhar, Dafali, Hawali, Fakir, Gujar, Halwai, Ansari, Ranki, Khasgar, Kharadis, Lohar, Chidimar, Hazam, Rai, and Teli, are clean occupational castes. The untouchable and impure groups are the Arzals. They are therefore under all other Muslims who are supposedly of great social standing. Although the Muslim caste system is loosely based on the Hindu model (Thapa, 1986), as has already been mentioned, it does have components that are caste-like in practice. It is disapproved by religious dogma. However, it also exists as a result of the high rank of foreign-born Muslims, specifically Arabs, Turks, Afghans, and Persians. In a similar vein, the conversion of high caste Hindus, particularly the clean occupational castes and the unclean untouchable castes from Hindus has also played a role (Thapa, 1986).

Muslims in Nepal are deeply impacted by the entire social framework of Muslim community in India. Because of this, they also have a variety of caste-like traits. This phenomenon continues to exist, even among Kathmandu's Muslims. As the Hindu tradition accords the Muslim a lower position, i.e., untouchable impure in Hindu society, they likewise engage in high and low behavior inside themselves. But it is important to understand that, technically, the Muslim concept of caste is not founded on the popular ideas of cleanliness and contamination (Res.3). Therefore, caste in Muslim society is

not as strong as it is in Hindu society. Therefore, no Muslim can touch another Muslim and pollute them. As a result, there are no social divisions or disparities based on distinctions, advantages, or descent (Res.2). In Muslim society, however, there is also the practice of purity and impurity, which runs counter to this idea. For instance, the modern structure of Muslim society has caused a number of elements to vanish that are in opposition to the practice of the caste system. As a result, it now includes additional features and components. The modern Muslim has inherited professions, professional specialization, a perception of contamination and purity, hierarchy, endogamous marriages, etc (Thapa,1997).

However, it is accurate to say that among Muslims, there are no individuals who are ritually clean in the same way as Brahmins. Anyone with religious training is capable of serving as an imam and guiding the congregation. As a result, there is a growing tendency in Muslim society where many people from lower castes enroll in religious institutions (Madrashas), which has led to a rise in the number of Imams or religious leaders from those castes(Res.2). Even if they participate in religious rituals, some social restrictions are still in place. Additionally, they must observe endogamy. Therefore, it establishes their actual rank in society. However, it is clear that this practice has contributed to the distortion of Islam's fundamental doctrines and egalitarian values in the Muslim community (Res.1).

### **Caste among the Nepali Muslim**

So far as the Muslim society in Nepal is concerned, their entire worldview is derived from those of their Indian counterparts. The Northern states of India are where the majority of Nepal's Muslims are from. The Hanafi sub-sect is the one in which the majority of Muslims in Nepal place their faith. At the same time, the Deoband school of thought is practiced or influenced by a sizable portion of Nepali Muslims (Thapa,1995). Majority of the Indian Muslims these days are the descendants of converted Muslims ( their ancestors converted from Hindu to Muslims , now called Pasmandas)(Res.1). Nepali Muslims are the migrant and were migrated from Tibet, Kashmir and India. Majority of them are Indian immigrants.

Nepali Muslims follows the tradition as well as rituals as their counterpart follows in India. Caste system is a product of Indian Pasmanda Muslim. These days they are struggling for their identity (Ojha, 2016). Although the holy Quran forbids any form of discrimination against people, the Nepali Muslim culture still practices it in all three of its major settlements, including the Tarai region, the Western hill villages, and the Kathmandu valley. The structure of the Muslim community in Nepal is based on the widely accepted Ashraf concept, which is used to designate superiors and inferiors (Thapa,1995). Castes that are untouchable and filthy do exist. Due to pollution, their vocational specialization is low-grade work. The so-called high caste Muslims discriminated against the soiled class by refusing to eat with them on the grounds of cleanliness(Res.3).

However, caste distinction among Nepali Muslims in Kathmandu does not depend on ceremonial dimensions but rather on other elements like blood purity, occupational requirements, and to some extent, religiosity. As a result, at least in terms of high and

low, the current Muslim society in Nepal does not follow the holy text's directives for egalitarianism (Res.2). In the Kathmandu Valley caste system is unquestionably weak and does not have the same foundation as ideas of cleanliness and pollution. But the notion of Ashraf is widely used by Muslims in Kathmandu and throughout Nepal, mostly to establish the status of the specific community (Res.2).

The Saiyads insist they are first among equals. The Kashmiri Shah in Kathmandu asserted their superiority by claiming to be a member of the Saiyads groups. But even the four higher groups in Kathmandu compete with one another to assert superiority over the rest. The Muslim population of the Kathmandu Valley is made up of members of several castes, including the Shah, Khan, Hazam, Uddin, Sheikh, Mugal, Tarai Muslims, and others (Thapa,1997). As a result of the urbanization of the Muslims in Kathmandu Valley, cultural practices are changing quickly. In contrast to the rural Muslims in Tarai and hill villages, urbanization and modernity both played a significant influence in establishing the fundamentals of cultural traditions. The conventional view of caste in Muslim society has been under fire in recent years due to the modern outlook and other related elements like education and rising exposure (Res.3). Not just the Muslims themselves, but also their Hindu neighbors alter how they view Muslims and treat them in terms of social rank.

The Muslim community in Kathmandu adheres firmly to the four higher caste standards (Res.1). The Ashrafs assert a superior social status within society. They also practiced pure and impure between various castes in Kathmandu up until a few years ago. The caste disparities among Muslims in Kathmandu are primarily seen in regards to marital ties, occupation, and religiosity. On the other hand, the idiom known as "The Five Kitchens of Wotu" is still crucial in this situation (Ojha,2068 B.S.). It was a reference to the superior prominence the Kashmiri shahs had in the Kathmandu Muslim community. They therefore held a greater rank. Other Kashmiris, however, were classified as belonging to a lesser social class. Compared to the Shahs, the JooKashmiris are inferior. As a result, occupation & blood determine rank among Kathmandu's Muslims. The four castes are, therefore, at the top due to descent in this case because the Rank, who are traditionally the distillers, are seen as low class Muslims in the society. The Hazams suffered a destiny remarkably similar to this (Thap.1997).

However, Muslims in Kathmandu do not have as significant caste influences. Even if the caste-parading aspect of it is weakly functional, it still functions. The agreement on matrimonial allowances is the second requirement. Caste is endogamous at every level. Marriages between members of the four upper castes (Ashrafs) and those of lower status are customarily forbidden. Even some of them are aware of their inferior social rank, thus they don't utilize their actual castes. Even among the 'four castes,' there are various customs. The Shahs, who consider themselves to be among the best, are Saiyads (Thapa,1995). Marriages used to be limited to members of the same status families. But nowadays, it's common to find mixed marriages among Muslim families. In Muslim families, the Hazams are assigned the task of providing water for ablution during weddings and feasts. When a couple gets married, they hand out invitations, and the Hazam is responsible for sending out word of any Muslim's passing so that people can gather for Zanaja (Res.3). In the eyes of other Muslims, this traditional job diminished their standing. All Muslims are treated equally, regardless of whether they

are pure or unclean. Between the Deobandi and Barailee Groups, there are differences. Due to their contrasting religious beliefs, they are unable to get married. They accuse one another of being false Muslims and assert their own superiority. Actually, their so-called religiosity prevents them from having a lasting relationship.

### Conclusion

Due to intellectual disagreements, Islam was divided into Sunni and Shia sects. The Sunni sect is practiced by the great majority of Muslims in Nepal. According to their philosophical ideas, Sunnis in Nepal are further split into numerous sub-sects, including Deobandhi, Berelvi, and wohabi. Nepali Muslims are descendants of Indian, Tibetan, and Kashmiri immigrants. The majority of Nepali Muslims moved from India and adopted their Islamic practices from their Indian counterparts. Islam is a religion that believes in Ownness of God and Islamic brotherhood. Arabic Muslims have a superior sense of belonging to the Prophet family, which is the source of hierarchical prejudice in Islam. Similarly, during the Mugal dynasty in India, converted Muslims contributed to the practice of caste hierarchies. The Arabs considered the Pasmandas, who were converted from Hindu marginalized groups and scheduled castes, as lesser rank in Muslim culture, resulting in hierarchical oppression.

The Nepali Muslims who were following their Indian counterparts, particularly in the Terai area, also followed the caste hierarchy among Nepali Muslims. On the other side, the Kashmiri Muslims, represented by the Saiyed family, have a sense of superiority, as seen by their marital practices. Because of the modernizing of society and the acceptance of inter-caste marriage, the practice of caste hierarchy has slowed. Such prejudice, in whatever form, not only damages societal cohesion but also violates Islamic principles of brotherhood.

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