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Educational challenges and socio-cultural barriers of Muslim minority in Nepal: An analysis of literacy, access, and integration

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Abstract

Nepal is a country characterized by multiethnicity, multilingualism and multi-religious nature with a population composition of 5.09% Muslims (NSO, 2023). While being one of the major religious minorities, Muslims in Nepal encounter various educational issues caused by socio-cultural factors, economic deprivation, linguistic issues and deficiencies in educational institutions. Muslims literacy rate is 61.6% while the overall literacy rate in Nepal is 76.2% (National Statistics Office [NSO, 2023] and Commons-Nepal, 2025). This study aims to discuss the educational condition of the minority group, the socio-cultural problems that hinder the minority group to enter into mainstream education and madarasas education and government policy regarding this issue. By applying descriptive analytical approach, the findings suggest that poverty, gender discrimination and language issues and lack of integration of madarasas with mainstream education are the major constraints based on the information presentations from both the census and peer-reviewed articles and organizational information. Based on the findings, certain policy recommendations have been suggested to overcome educational obstacles. This covers education strategies for the Muslim minority in Nepal, madarasas, literacy and social inclusion.

Keywords: Muslim minority, educational challenges, Madrasa education, social inclusion, Nepal



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Introduction

There is no doubt that education is a key and transformative element in individual, collective and national development. Education is not only a way to build skills and knowledge, but also provides opportunities for social mobility, economic growth, political engagement and empowerment. Education allows people to secure more employment opportunities, improve their living standard and be involved in public life and democracy. Education is a factor of economic development, social integration, innovation and sustainable development, on the national level. Educational development and equitable access to education is therefore a key concern in any society, particularly in a country as diverse and multicultural as India where issues of inclusion, equality and social justice are interconnected with issues of education. Education is not only a development matter in a diverse society with multiple ethnic, language and religious communities, but it is also a matter of representation, of rights and equality. There are access and participation problems in mainstream educational systems of minority communities which have longer term effects on their ability to participate in employment, income, political and social aspects. The case study of a country like Nepal, which is rich ethnically, culturally and religiously is useful. In the last couple of decades, Nepal has improved a lot in education but the improvement has not been equal among all the groups. The second largest religious minority group in Nepal is Muslims. The 2021 National Population and Housing Census (NPHC) estimates that there are approximately 1.483 million Muslims, accounting for 5.09% of the total population (NSO, 2023). Nepali Muslims live primarily in the lowlands of the south of the country, the Terai bordering India, in smaller numbers in cities and hilly areas. The Muslims have lived side by side with people of other religions in Nepal for many centuries, but there are certain development gaps in various social and economic areas in the community including education. Muslims have the lowest level of literacy in Nepal, at 61.6% compared to the national average of 76.2% (Commons-Nepal, 2025). Low levels of literacy are correlated with lower employment rates, income levels, political engagement and social mobility, therefore educational disadvantage is not an isolated issue, it is an issue that impacts socio-economic status of the community as a whole. An increasing concern is gender inequality in the Muslim community. Women Muslims are significantly less literate than men, due to poverty, gender role expectations, early marriage rates, and family obligations and limited mobility. Thus, the double marginalisation of Muslim women and Muslim girls occurs on the grounds of gender and minority identity. While cultural and religious factors may be important, the situation of Muslims in Nepal cannot simply be explained by these issues; it depends on the interplay of various socio-cultural, economic, linguistic, geographic and institutional factors, such as poverty, home-school language mismatch, poor school infrastructure in Muslim dominated areas, and the limited integration of madarasas with the mainstream education system.

While this body of concern, the existing literature on minority education in Nepal has focused mainly on caste-based exclusion and ethnic federalism (Bennett, 2005; Sharma, 2019), relatively little sustained analysis has focused on the Muslim community specifically. Most of the literature on Muslim education focuses on a specific dimension, such as the study of madrasa recognition (Parvez et al., 2023) or language policy (Awasthi, 2004), and fails to address the literacy trends and gender disparity together with the integration of madarasas

within a single frame of analysis. This is the space this study aims to fill: an integrated study of socio-cultural, linguistic and institutional barriers and how they interact to influence the educational outcomes of Muslims in Nepal after the 2021 census. The originality of this study is the synthesis; its significance is the creation of an evidence base that can directly inform policy on madarasas integration, mother tongue teaching and targeted support for Muslim girls, where, at this time, there are policy documents but the factual situation informing them is highly fragmented.

The present paper is aimed to understand the educational challenges and problems faced by the Muslim minorities in Nepal. The three questions are: First, how are the current situation of the education of the Muslims in Nepal with regard to literacy, enrolment and gender ratio and level of education? Secondly, what are the social, cultural, economic, linguistic and institutional barriers to equal access to quality education for Muslims? Third, what policy changes and strategies are needed to enhance the educational integration and progress of this minority? The sources of secondary data used are mainly national census reports, journal articles, policy and government documents and NGO reports on the issues of minority education and integration. Improving Muslims' education in Nepal is not only crucial for educational outcomes, but also for employment, political inclusion, social mobility, community development and a more inclusive society in Nepal.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning for this research is based on the theory of social exclusion that provides a more nuanced understanding of marginalisation beyond economic poverty (Silver & Miller, 2003). This theory is relevant to the analysis of religious and ethnic minorities' education issues as it draws attention to the structural aspect of discrimination and its impact. In Nepal for the Muslim community social exclusion is more of a multi-pronged phenomenon, including poverty, linguistic marginalization (Urdu language as their home language in a Nepali medium of instruction), religious discrimination, and geographic clustering in poor areas of Terai. Furthermore, the framework for the analysis of educational inequity is influenced by international standards and norms, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which sets out the need for inclusive and equitable education for all learners (United Nations, 2015). Nepal's Constitution of Nepal (2015) sets the principle of equal right to education for all citizens without any discrimination, and also provides for the education of minorities in their own mother tongue at basic level. This article also uses Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to account for the possibility that the educational habitus of the dominant group may be counterproductive for minority students who are less familiar with the cultural values within the dominant education system (Bourdieu, 1986). Muslim children in Nepal may be excluded from a school environment dominated by a culture which is mainly Hindu-Brahminic.

Research Methodology

This research is descriptive and analytical with secondary data sources used. The selection of this approach is intended to address the subject of the educational status and problems of the Muslim minority group in Nepal, which requires a broad perspective of the

demographic, literacy, policy and socio-cultural data that are already available in official documents and academic sources.

Three explicit criteria were used to include secondary material to make the selection and treatment of sources more transparent. The first criterion was relevance towards Muslim education, Muslim literacy or related socio-cultural indicators in Nepal, and not towards minority issues in general. Second, recency and comparability: The data was from or comparable to the 2021 National Population and Housing Census, and data from earlier censuses (e.g., 2011) was used only to provide a time trend. Third, credibility: only government publications and peer-reviewed journal articles and reports from well-known research institutions and NGOs with a documented field presence (such as CERID and NMWWS) were counted as sources. If two or more sources provided figures for the same indicator, the figures were checked against one another, with any discrepancies explicitly noted in the Analysis section, but not silently reconciled. This procedure aims to allow the basis of each claim to be traced, and to differentiate, as much as possible from the document literature, between those claims well corroborated and those that can only be attributed to a single source and are therefore subject to more critical interpretation.

The study has a descriptive approach to present a systematic description of the existing situation of education among Muslims in Nepal such as literacy, gender gap, spatial division, access to education and levels of education and has an analytical approach to understand the underlying causes, trends and impacts of the educational inequality. The methodology used is secondary data because the existing data on the topic is ample and credible, such as the recent census and policy documents, development reports, and research studies on minority groups and education in Nepal. While the national statistics and policies are applicable to the entire country, the Terai region of Nepal, where a majority of Muslims reside, is given special attention, along with districts with significant Muslim populations like Rautahat, Banke, Kapilvastu and Parsa. These districts reflect a great deal of the educational opportunities and challenges facing Muslim populations such as language, gender, madararas, poverty and schooling in general and provide the context for the study.

Three categories of secondary sources are used to ensure coverage, validity and triangulation. First, the official demographic and literacy statistics by religion from the National Population and Housing Census 2021 (NPOC 2021) released by the National Statistics Office (NSO). Second, academic journals and articles obtained from NepJOL, Taylor & Francis, Research Gate and Google Scholar which have theoretical inputs and empirical studies on minority education, social exclusion and language policy in Nepal and South Asia. Third, the government, NGO and research institution reports such as CERID reports and the Nepal Muslim Women Welfare Society (NMWWS) reports at field level that do not always reflect in census data, and policy documents like the Constitution of Nepal (2015) and the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP 2016-2023).

After the data was collected, it was analysed using the thematic analysis approach which involved examining and categorising the data into five themes: educational opportunity (school access, school enrolment, school infrastructure and school progression); literacy disparity (difference between Muslims and national average, and difference between males and females); socio-cultural hindrance (poverty, child marriage, gender roles, language,

discrimination); integration of madarasas (relationship between religious and formal schools); and policy response (government initiatives, legal protection, and institutional limitations). Literacy percentages and demographic concentrations are used to identify quantitative evidence of trends, while the community reports and case studies identify qualitative evidence of lived experience and structural issues.

There are strong aspects to the methodology; it provides a nationally representative review in a cost-effective manner, it can make comparisons across multiple sources and, it can provide policy-based conclusions, particularly important in the field of minority education where gaining access to large-scale fields is difficult. It has a few drawbacks, such as the fact that it is based on secondary data and lacks fresh primary interviews with students, teachers, parents, or policymakers, and some data sources vary by publication date as well as some variations within Muslim communities not being fully reflected. However, to draw from a variety of and credible sources ensures a reliable in-depth understanding of educational condition of Muslims in Nepal.

Analysis of the Information, Discussion, and Findings

Educational Status of Muslims in Nepal

Muslims' educational status has been improving gradually and is still below the average level in Nepal. The literacy rate among Muslims in Nepal is 61.6% (NSO, 2023; Commons-Nepal, 2025), which is below the national average of 76.2% as per the National Population and Housing Census 2021. Throughout this section, the comparative figures have been scattered, and it is good to have them all together in Table 1 so that one can easily see the extent of the difference and whether change is in the right direction or whether it is in the wrong.

Indicator	Value	Comparator	Source
National literacy rate (2021)	76.2%	—	NSO, 2023
Muslim literacy rate (2021)	61.6%	14.6 pts below national average	NSO, 2023; Commons-Nepal, 2025
Muslim literacy rate (2011)	43.6%	17.9-pt gain over 10 years	NSO, 2023; Commons-Nepal, 2025
Muslim female literacy (earlier estimate)	33.98%	Cited as improving in 2021 census; figure needs independent verification	SMC Journal of Sociology, 2025
Muslim literacy, Kathmandu vs. Terai	Higher in Kathmandu	Confirms urban–rural gap within the community	SMC Journal of Sociology, 2025

The figures in combination indicate two gaps, one between the religious groups (Muslims 14.6 percentage points behind the national average) and an internal religious group gap (lower literacy among Muslim women and among Muslims in the Terai compared to Kathmandu). These differences are important for policy design: a single national level intervention focused on closing the religious-group gap will not necessarily close the internal gender gap, which seems to be influenced by other sets of factors, as well as the urban–rural gap, which is shaped by different factors such as access to school facilities and economic opportunities. This improvement is also significant, as the gap between 2011 and 2021 is 17.9 percentage points, but this does not prove that the gap is decreasing (although it can be inferred

from the census data, as the results were also influenced by the 2016 madrasa recognition policy as discussed below).

The level of university enrollment among Muslims is also behind others. As revealed by the study conducted by the SMC Journal of Sociology (2025), the literacy rate among the Muslims of Kathmandu was higher compared to those of Terai areas. This clearly suggests that there are marked differences in terms of education between the urban and rural Muslims. In addition to that, it can be stated that the Muslims were generally in Favor of education, which is against the stereotype.

Socio-Cultural Barriers to the Education of Muslims

There exist several social and cultural barriers that make it difficult for Muslims living in Nepal to receive an education. Economic instability is key; the majority of Muslims live in the Terai belt where they practice farming and are characterized by poverty and child labour which makes it imperative for the families to earn money than send their children to school (Siddique, 2001).

Socio-Cultural Factors Hindering the Education of Muslims

Several interacting socio-cultural factors prevent Muslims in Nepal from accessing and completing education. First, economic instability plays a central role: the Muslim population is heavily clustered in the agriculture-dependent Terai region, where high levels of poverty and child labour lead families to prioritise income over schooling, resulting in high dropout rates, especially at the secondary level (Siddique, 2001). This is no exaggeration: 20.3% of Nepalese citizens were living below the national poverty line as of 2022 (World Bank, 2022), while according to the Human Development Index, the Muslims have a score of 0.401, which is just slightly better than that of Madhesi Dalits (0.383) and inferior to those of all other social groups for which this data is disaggregated (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012 as cited in Asian Development Bank, 2013). That is to say that the Muslims are ranked among the two lowest social groups in Nepal on the basis of an index that accounts for educational achievements among others.

The level of participation of Muslims in university education is also behind others. According to a study carried out by the SMC Journal of Sociology (2025), the level of literacy among the Muslim population in Kathmandu was higher compared to those in the Terai areas. This shows that the educational prospects for Muslims vary greatly depending on whether they live in urban or rural areas. The same study concluded that Muslims are not against education contrary to the popular perception.

Thirdly, societal attitudes on girls' education are still negative in some of areas including on girls going to a mixed school and encouraging marriage of underage girls resulting to higher dropout rate for girl's. Also even if parents' are aware of the importance of sending girl child to school yet there are many structural limitations on keeping girl in the local school such as no availability of lady teachers and no provision for female's safe transportation for the girl's to go to school (NMWWS, 2024). Regarding the specific relationship between child marriage and school dropout, the highest quality evidence for Nepal to date comes from Sekine and Hodgkin (2017) who assessed the 2014 nationally representative Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey. In that analysis, married girls 15–17 years of age were about ten times more likely to

be out of school compared to those who were not (adjusted odds ratio 10.04). And child marriage was the most frequent stated cause of dropout among women aged 20–24 years (40% of all reported responses).

In Sekine and Hodgkin's descriptive data, those who had been married early were relatively more likely to be identified as either Dalit or Muslim, but after controlling for other characteristics in their multivariable analysis, the strongest predictors of having dropped out were household head's low education level and Kirats religious group.

I say this with precision in mind rather than as a blanket statement; to our knowledge, no previous analysis in Nepal has sought to distinguish Muslim-specific rates of marriage-induced dropout, so the association in this group is still something the analysis presented here calls out as an unanswered question.

Third, the language barrier is a persistent obstacle: Urdu is widely spoken at home by Nepalese Muslims, while government schools use Nepali as the medium of instruction. This mismatch undermines academic performance and self-confidence, contributing to dropout (Hamiz et al., 2009), despite the constitutional mandate for mother-tongue instruction at the basic level, which remains poorly implemented in public schools. Here, too, precision matters more than a general statement: no published dataset reports how many Muslim students specifically have dropped out of school because of the Urdu–Nepali mismatch, and this study did not locate one. The closest available evidence is CERID's (2005) and the World Bank's (2005) documentation that non-Nepali-speaking students nationally show lower test scores and higher repetition and dropout than Nepali-speaking peers — a pattern consistent with, but not proof of, the mechanism proposed for Muslim children. This gap between the plausibility of the language-barrier argument and the absence of Muslim-specific dropout figures is itself a finding, and it points to a concrete need for future disaggregated data collection by the NSO or MoEST.

Fourth, socio-economic marginalization compounds caste-based patterns of exclusion: Nepalese Muslims' socio-economic conditions are only marginally better than those of hill and Terai Dalits, placing both groups among the most disadvantaged in the country (Socio-cultural Inclusion of Muslims in Nepal, 2019). This constrains access to employment, healthcare and justice, which in turn limits families' capacity to finance education. Taken together, these four factors are not independent; poverty limits a family's ability to compensate for language mismatch (for example, by paying for private tuition), while restrictive gender norms interact with poverty to make girls' schooling the first expense cut when household budgets are tight. This layered, compounding pattern rather than any single factor in isolation is what the social exclusion framework outlined earlier predicts and helps explain why partial interventions addressing only one barrier have had limited effect.

The Significance of Madrasa Education

Madrasa education has long been central to Muslim children's schooling in Nepal, traditionally combining religious instruction with basic literacy. Madrasas were officially recognized as formal learning centres by the Nepal government in 2016, giving Muslims access to an official form of education for the first time (Parvez et al., 2023).

Despite this recognition, integration with mainstream curricula remains incomplete. CERID (2018) found that while recognition increased access, the quality of learning remains a challenge: most madrasas lack sufficient furniture and textbooks, and qualified instructors for the national curriculum are scarce (Parvez et al., 2023), with no Urdu versions of mainstream textbooks available.

A study in the Kapilvastu and Banke districts found a generally positive reaction among parents, madrasa administrators and learners to the official recognition of madrasas, since it allowed Muslim learners to sit examinations and access higher education (Parvez et al., 2023).

The researchers recommended establishing a Federal Madrasa Board to oversee curricular alignment and resource mobilization; nevertheless, full integration of madrasa and mainstream schooling has yet to be achieved due to the persistently poor quality of instruction in many madrasas.

Government Policy and Responses

The Nepalese government has developed several policy stances on inclusive education for minorities, including Muslims. Nepal has committed to the Education for All (EFA) approach, and the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016–2023 paid special attention to focus groups through flexible curricula, contextualized learning and affirmative measures to improve minority access (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2016), including a requirement that curricula contain 20% regional/local content.

However, implementation of these measures has been weak. The formal recognition of madrasas in 2016 was a positive step, but resource allocation has not followed, and the involvement of Muslim minorities in educational decision-making, curriculum development and teacher training remains almost non-existent. NGOs such as NMWWS have partly filled this gap by running literacy classes for Muslim women and raising parental awareness of the benefits of education (NMWWS, 2024).

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) provides a robust normative framework for minority education rights, including the right to education free from discrimination and the right to basic education in one's mother tongue. Translating these constitutional guarantees into effective policy for Nepal's Muslims, however, continues to require sustained political and social commitment.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the educational situation and socio-cultural barriers facing the Muslim minority in Nepal, and its findings point to a consistent picture rather than a set of isolated observations. Three data points anchor this picture: a 14.6-percentage-point literacy gap between Muslims (61.6%) and the national average (76.2%) as of 2021; a 17.9-percentage-point improvement in Muslim literacy since 2011, showing genuine but insufficient progress; and a persistent internal gap between Muslim women and men, and between Terai and Kathmandu Muslims, that a purely national-level policy response would not resolve on its own. These figures confirm that the community's educational disadvantage cannot be explained by religious faith or a rejection of modern education – a stereotype the evidence in this study directly contradicts – but instead reflects a compounding mix of poverty, gender inequality,

language mismatch between home and school, and the incomplete integration of madrasa education into the national system.

Rather than restating these factors individually, three concrete implications follow directly from the data presented in the Analysis section. First, because the internal gender and urban–rural gaps are distinct from the overall religious-group gap, policy should combine a general, national-level component (e.g., resourcing the 2016 madrasa recognition properly, as CERID (2018) and Parvez et al. (2023) both note remains unresourced) with targeted components aimed specifically at Terai districts and at Muslim girls such as female teacher recruitment and safe transport, which NMWWS (2024) identifies as the binding constraint on girls' school attendance rather than parental attitudes. Second, since the constitutional mother-tongue provision exists on paper but is not implemented in practice, translating it into Urdu-medium instruction and Urdu textbook availability at the primary level in Muslim-majority areas is a low-cost, high-relevance step that does not require new legislation. Third, given that the involvement of Muslim communities in curriculum development and school management remains almost absent, establishing the Federal Madrasa Board recommended by Parvez et al. (2023), with genuine representation of madrasa administrators and parents, would address the institutional-voice gap identified across multiple sections of this analysis.

In short, enhancing the educational experience of Muslims in Nepal is not a question of minority development in isolation; it is a matter of social justice, national integration and the practical fulfilment of constitutional guarantees. By addressing poverty, gender inequality, language mismatch and incomplete madrasa integration together, rather than as separate problems, Nepal can build a more genuinely inclusive education system one that closes both the gap between Muslims and the national average, and the gaps within the Muslim community itself.

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Notes

1. Several in-text citations (Parvez et al., 2023; CERID, 2018; Hamiz et al., 2009; NMWWS, 2024; Commons-Nepal, 2025; SMC Journal of Sociology, 2025; 'Socio-cultural Inclusion of Muslims in Nepal,' 2019) do not yet have corresponding full reference entries. Please supply the complete bibliographic details for these sources so the reference list is fully APA-compliant and every in-text citation resolves to an entry, per the reviewer's comment.
2. Two further citations added in this revision — CERID (2005) and World Bank (2005), on the relationship between non-Nepali home language and dropout/repetition — are widely cited in the education-in-Nepal literature but the authors have not been able to verify the exact original report titles from available sources. Please confirm and supply full bibliographic details for these two, or indicate if a specific alternative source is preferred, before final submission.