

South Asia
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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. 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 behaviours, language, beliefs, and relations with the local Hindus.

The Kashmiri Muslims arrived in the Hindu state of Nepal in the 15th century. Although historians differ on the date given for their arrival, there is no doubt about their being the first Muslims to arrive in Nepal. Babu Ram Acharya, a prominent historian, holds that a Muslim saint built the Kashmiri *Pancha Taqia*, the first mosque in Nepal, in 1524 AD.

These early Kashmiris, whose descendants still live in Kathmandu, used the city as a centre for trade with Tibet and India.¹ As far back as the 18th century, they had earned a formidable reputation for their efficiency in commercial activities and were thus allowed to enter Kathmandu under condition that they would not undertake missionary activities or interfere in Hindu affairs in any way. Indeed, this condition was upheld. However, under the rule of a new conqueror, Prithvi Narayan Shah, founder of modern Nepal, the Kashmiris began to fear persecution – a fear which compelled them to shut down business and move to India. The new king, having considered the fact that the Kashmiris had such prosperous relations with the deposed Malla Kings of Kathmandu², imposed various restrictions that led two Kashmiri trading houses to remain in Kathmandu after 1774 AD.

The Kashmiri Muslims today

The Nepali Kashmiris maintain a definite social status. It is even said that they entertain a sense of superiority over the other local Nepali Muslims.³ They have their own mosque and a separate burial ground in Kathmandu. Nonetheless, very much influenced by indigenous local Nepali culture, the Kashmiris are not indifferent to the process of cultural assimilation. They have adapted several Hindu tenets to their cultural practices, but maintain a preference for matrimonial and other social ties with families of similar status. Thus, they are found to be rather conservative in contracting marriages, although some cases of marriages with non-Kashmiri Muslims do exist.

Their long history of residence in Kathmandu has contributed to a genuine blending of their culture and language with the local people. But

Ethnic Variation of Nepal's Muslim Minority



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their entire set of family relations and religious activities are generally limited to the Kathmandu Valley.

The Tibetan Muslims

Tibetan Muslims can also be found in Nepal. They are mostly Tibetan refugees who fled Tibet after the Chinese occupation began in 1960. Historical evidence suggests that the Lhasa envoy of King Ratna Malla invited certain Tibetan Muslims to come to Kathmandu in the 15th century. The Tibetan Muslims today maintain a distinct Tibetan culture, although their extended stay in Kathmandu has resulted in a certain degree of blending culture with that of the Kashmiri and Indian Muslims. There are altogether some 100 Tibetan Muslim families in the Kathmandu Valley. They actively participate in various religious activities and collaborate with their Tibetan Muslim counterparts in Darjeeling and Kalimpong in India, who have established a joint association called Tibetan Muslim Welfare Association.⁴

The hill Muslims: *churautey* (bangle sellers)

A large number of Nepali Muslims live in different parts of the western hill region, mostly in

the districts of Gorkha, Tanahun, Kaski, Syangja, Dailekh, Pyuthan, Arghakhanchi, Palpa and Nuwakot. The mosques and small *makhtabs* exist in major hill Muslim settlements. The hill Muslims are the descendants of Indian migrants, and are synonymously known as *churautey* (bangle sellers), considered to be a branch of the Churihar of the plains.⁵ Common tribes among them are the Mirja and Fakirs, the latter being considered lower in the social hierarchy. The hill Muslims are very much influenced by the surrounding Hindu culture. The *makhtabs* or *madrasas* and *masjids*, which exist in the settlements of hill Muslims, have been unable to maintain indigenous Muslim culture. Interaction with the Hindu families is more frequent than that with other Muslims. The hill Muslims and local Hindus regularly invite each other to various rituals celebrations and festivals. However, despite their strong social ties, the Hindus consider the Muslims to be an inferior caste. One manifestation of this is expressed by the Hindus cooking their own meals even when attending feasts at the homes of Muslim neighbours. This sentiment is nonetheless less important nowadays than it was, for example, some years ago.

These emigrant Muslims gradually accommodated themselves to the local conditions. It can be said that their present culture is a confluent of both cultures. They have been strongly influenced by the Hindus in all aspects of lifecycle rituals and in the naming of children, to name but two examples. They even tend to celebrate the Hindu festivals with greater enthusiasm than the Hindus themselves. The Hindus, on the other hand, also participate in Muslim celebrations.

It is worthy of mention that training schools in Islamic fundamentals are not available in hill areas. The lack of proper knowledge of religion is most likely what allowed for their integration of Hindu cultural tenets. Hence, the process of cultural assimilation is more rapid in the hills as compared to that of Muslims in the southern plain. The hill Muslims, despite being considered 'untouchables' by the Hindus, observe certain components of the Hindu death rituals and also worship ancestors. Such observances are deeply rooted in their life pattern.

Tarai Muslims

The Tarai (plain land in the South) Muslims are entirely comprised of descendants of Indian migrants who came to Nepal in search of employment opportunities. At present, the population

of Tarai Muslims constitutes almost two million people. They are scattered amongst the 20 districts of the Tarai region. They have cultural, religious and other social ties with the Muslims of Northern India.

The year of arrival of the Indian Muslims in the Tarai region remains unknown. T. A. Ansari has argued that they have been living in there since before Nepal gained political control over the region.⁶ The uninterrupted intercourse between the people of the region and Indian states supports this argument.

In the eastern Tarai, the majority of Muslims are Ansari and Mansuri. The Muslims of Tarai have high quality religious education facilities. A large number of reputable *madrasas*, *masjids* and *yetimkhanas* (orphanages) have been established in the region. Muslim children first go to the *madrasas* for religious education, where the Maulvis from India teach. There are also Nepali Muslims trained in India or Saudi Arabia who teach religion at the *madrasas*. The Tarai Muslims are thus able to maintain their identity as they attempt to avoid cultural assimilation. They can learn Urdu, Arabic, and Persian languages along with the study of the holy Qur'an and the Hadith. But the growing trend of English education in Nepal has brought about certain changes in indigenous religious education: some of the *madrasas* have introduced the teaching of English and modern mathematics as independent subjects. In these religious schools, girls also have equal opportunity for education.

The Tarai Muslims clearly differ in several ways from the hill Muslims. Such differences are noticeable mainly in physical appearance, language, dress conventions, and cultural practices. It should be mentioned that Muslims in certain remote villages in the hills, in western and far western regions, are completely ignorant of Islamic culture and religious practices.

Apart from the fact that the availability of religious facilities has allowed the Tarai Muslims to maintain their culture intact, they are very much traditional orthodox in religious matters. This, of course, has led to decreased adaptability. Furthermore, they entertain excellent relations with Islamic institutions beyond the boarder. The extra-territorial loyalty of the Tarai Muslims in terms of their religious beliefs remains vital to all of their cultural activities – thereby affecting their identity as a whole. ◀

Notes

- Gaborieau, Marc (1981), 'Peasants, Urban Traders and Rural Artisans', *Journal-Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 312; Jeddah: King Abdul Aziz University, pp. 199-200.
- Siddika, Shamima (1995), *Muslims of Nepal*, Kathmandu: Gazala Siddika, p. 112.
- Ansari, Tahir Ali (1988), 'Muslim Minority in Nepal: A Research in Progress', *Journal-Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 9 (1), pp. 160-61.
- 'Tibetan Muslims' (Jan.-Feb. 1994), *Tibet Bulletin*, Dharmashala, pp. 8-9.
- Gaborieau, *ibid.* pp. 242-243.
- Ansari, *ibid.* pp. 160.

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View of the 'Kashmiri Taqia', a mosque of Kashmiri Muslims.



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