

Practice of Caste Hierarchy among the Muslims of Miya Patan of Pokhara

Niranjan Ojha*
Arjun Bahadur Bhandari•

Abstract

In a country like Nepal, where Hindus make up the majority of the population, the study of religious minorities reflects its importance. A distinctive form of stratification is caste. Hindu concepts and arguments can be used to understand and explain this occurrence, which is solely a Hindu phenomenon. Caste is widespread outside of the Indian Subcontinent, in the Arab world, Polynesia, North and East Africa, Japan, and North America. The Muslim community follows a system of hierarchy and upholds caste purity just like the Hindu community. Similar to Brahminism in Hindu society, Saiyedism in Muslim society (the Arab domination) is a major contributor to caste prejudice in the Muslim community. Based on qualitative study, this article describes the critical actions that must be taken at each level of the caste hierarchy. With the use of an observational technique, in-depth interviews, and library research, the subject is being generalized. For the objective of knowing more, Muslim scholars and elder people who had witnessed the practice were chosen as the respondents. Because they requested anonymity, the respondents are referred to as Res.1, Res.2, Res.3, and so forth. The focus of this investigation is Miya Patan's Muslim's caste hierarchy. This article is limited to historical study among the Muslims of Miya Patan of Pokhara. It is not concerned with other aspects of the study area. It makes an effort to address the problem of caste hierarchy among Muslims in Nepal.

Keywords: Saiyed- the Untouchables- Hindus- Upper caste- hierarchy.

Introduction

Caste is the term for the system that divides people into clan and hierarchical groups. Hindus primarily experience caste based on their karma (work) and dharma (duty). The caste system is acknowledged and supported in Manusmriti, which is widely regarded as the most significant and authoritative work on Hindu law and which was written at least 1,000 years before the birth of Christ (Res.2). Caste and

* Dr. Ojha is an Associate Professor of Central Department of History, TU. Email: ojhaniranjan@gmail.com

• Arjun Bahadur Bhandari is an Associate Professor of Department of History Prithivi Narayan Campus, TU. Email: banariarjun2@gmail.com

hierarchy are the main concepts used in Hinduism to categorize people into groups according to their areas of expertise. Hindus were classified in the future based on their birth. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are the four main caste groups in the Hindu caste system. Many people think that Brahma, the Hindu creator god, is where all different groups have their roots, but during the Vedic period, there was no caste or hierarchical discrimination among Hindus. It was only introduced in Nepal after the ancient period. Caste systems and hierarchical divisions were introduced into the Muslim community as a result of the Pasmada Muslims who were Hindus and converted into Islam.

The foundation of Islam is built on two fundamental concepts: God's unity and humanity's fraternity (Res. 1). All of humanity is Allah's family, and the dearest of them in Allah's eyes is the one who helps his family the most, the Prophet added (Faridi & Siddiqi, 1992). In theory, Islam makes no distinction between different types of men. During prayers in their mosques, there is usually no distinction. The concepts of ceremony, purity, and contamination are all condemned by Islam (Res. 2).

However, as the concept of untouchability spread, caste became more developed in Muslim society. The caste system is a deeply ingrained institution in Indian civilization, and as such, it has influenced the social structures of non-Hindu communities as well. Muslims and other religious groups have caste or traits similar to caste, which contrasts with Islamic brotherhood and egalitarianism (Madelbaum, 1910). Despite the similarities between Hindu and Muslim caste systems, Muslim castes lack the conceptual and ethical underpinnings that Hindu cosmologies provide for the existence of classes 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 Pasmada Muslims (Res. 3). Similar to this, Indian 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.

With the exception of Shanker Thapa, Abdul Salam Khan, Niranjana Ojha, Quraisha Banu, Megan Adamson Sijapati, David Seddon, Sarfarazuddin Ahmad, T.C. Rastogi, no comprehensive research on Nepali Muslims has been published. So far, all available works have taken the form of research papers. Before beginning the investigation, all of these sources are evaluated. Academics and other researchers have not prioritized the issue of caste hierarchy practice in Nepali Muslim society. These are broad studies that make no mention of caste stratification in Nepali Muslim society. Prior to conducting research, all of these literatures are evaluated. Abdul Salam Khan (2014) 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. Shanker Thapa conducted an important study on marriage and divorce in his research paper “Marriage in the Muslim society: A case study of Birganj-based Muslims” (1986). This study was created based on a microanalysis of Muslim settlements in Birganj. The raised research issue is not addressed; instead, it focuses on the history of Nepali Muslims, the practice of Nikaah and Talaah, and caste stratification among Muslims. Quraisha Banu’s master's thesis (1980), “Introduction to Muslims in Nepal” provides an educational and general overview of Nepali Muslims. The historical analysis of this study includes topics such as the social structure, religion, women’s status, and family life of Kathmandu’s Muslims. It also fails to address the research. David Seddon (2018) “The Muslim Communities of Nepal” is based on a field study report. It is focused on socio-cultural as well as political conditions of Nepali Muslims of Tarai. It is relevant to conceptualized the concept of Nepali Muslims especially the Tarai Muslims but don’t address the Islamic hierarchy and caste system. In his book Sarfarazuddin Ahmad (1991) writes about the

social discrimination towards Muslims in South Asia. He has further highlighted on the issue of Islamic transition. This book neither deals with Islamic culture nor about the hierarchical system among the Muslims. Megan Adamson Sijapati (2013), in her book “Islamic Revival in Nepal Religion and a New Nation” explores regional and global factors influencing contemporary Muslim identity and the Islamic revival movement in Nepal. On the base of fieldwork, it explores Muslim participation in local politics and the global Sunni revival movement. The book also explores Muslim struggles for self-definition and belonging amidst historical marginalization and anti-Muslim violence. The book highlights the complex response of Islamic revival to minority communities in a historically Hindu kingdom. These works of literature can help to generate ideas and identify research problems. It makes understanding of Nepalese Muslim behavior. Although it is useful for developing research tools but the broad characteristics of the caste hierarchical system and its application in Nepal are not covered. The aforementioned national and international research, books, and publications attempted to examine various aspects of Muslim society, but they fell short of providing a comprehensive picture. These texts do not provide evidence for the research problem of the study, but they do provide some insight into how the Muslim caste system might be conceptualized.

This article aims to highlight some previously unnoticed flaws in the Muslim caste system in general and Miya Patan in particular. Numerous researchers’ contribution mentioned in the introductory part have discovered solutions to many of the issues. This research focuses on the topic that was overlooked in previous studies. The research is centered on the following questions.

- What is the origin of the Muslim caste system in Nepal?
- How far the Muslim caste hierarchical system has been practiced in Miya Patan of Pokhara?

Method and Materials

This paper serves as the foundation for the qualitative research approach. Explanatory, descriptive, analytical, and informative methods were all used in this study. There were formal and informal in-depth interviews with the issue's stakeholders. Although some historical references are made at appropriate times, the majority of the data in this study is primary. Besides primary sources the appropriate number of published books, journal articles, online resources, and publications has been used. For this study, all of the data was categorized, summarized, and analyzed. This study is limited to a historical examination of Nepali Muslim caste and hierarchical systems especially in Miya Patan of Pokhara. This paper does not cover the social, political, legal, economic, or other aspects of the Muslim caste system. This paper has been framed under the guiding principles of assimilation theory and religious theory. Assimilation theory refers to the adoption of a majority or dominant culture's religious practices and beliefs by a minority or subordinate culture. It is an important form of cultural assimilation (<https://en.wikipedia.org>). Durkheim (1912) defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, beliefs and practices that unite all those who adhere to them in a single moral community. Religion, according to him, provides social cohesion and social control in order to keep society in social solidarity.

Discussion

Concept 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, caste is a structural feature of society. Caste is widespread in the Arab world, Polynesia, North and East Africa, Guatemala, Japan, and Native Americans in North America, in addition to the Indian subcontinent. The caste phenomenon was created by the system to which it belonged. It is closely related to a number of specific goals that it strives to achieve. Because it is a form, it has a number of distinguishing characteristics (Thapa, 1997). A caste, on the other hand, is recognized or described based on its characteristics. A caste, for example, has a common name, descends occupational specialties, practices endogamous marriages, and develops their own sub-culture within their own society. According to Hinduism, because souls are immortal, they can change and re-change bodies based on how well one fulfills their obligations. According to Hindu philosophy, a man's birth in a particular group is not a result of chance, but rather of the merit he gains by performing his tasks. Social historians and other academics define caste in a variety of ways. Castes are ranked and organized hierarchically (Thapa, 1995).

Caste hierarchical structure among the Nepali Muslims

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

Islam is a religion founded on egalitarianism. As a result, a man's social standing is not determined by the frequency of his birth. The fundamental principles of Islam are diametrically opposed to the caste system. As a result, Islam rejects all forms of social stratification, differentiation, and discrimination based on factors such as birth, image-related material gain, occupation, wealth, or matrimony. Everyone is treated equally, regardless of social or ethnic background. The followers enjoy the same benefits, and they form the global brotherhood. Islam forbids any form of caste prejudice in human society. The holy Quran mentions egalitarianism and opposition to social discrimination numerous times (Quran 19:13, N/D).

All forms of superiority are condemned in Islam. Islam values equality among its adherents and, as a result, judges people based on their decency and degree of faith in Islam, rather than their race, nationality, or lineage. The Prophet Muhammad held high regard for universal equality, the concept of world brotherhood, and fraternity. He also stated, "Neither a non-Arab nor an Arab is superior to the other" (Quran 49:10, N/D). As it was brought outside of Arabia and exposed to other cultures, Islam gradually absorbed aspects and tenets from them. In India, Muslims are classified according to caste (Res. 3).

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 endogamy, hierarchical organization, and caste-based council. The Gotra (clan name) 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).

Humans are thus not the target of any discrimination under Islamic law. As a result, Islam does not recognize distinctions based on race, class, or even caste. There is no upper or lower limit. Nobody has the authority to pollute someone simply by touching them (Res. 1). There is no concept of purity or pollution based on societal factors. Marriage, commensality, and other relationships, like this, have no highs or lows. As a result, no one is discriminated against because of their birthplace or employment (Res. 2). As a result, the prevalence of characteristics similar to castes is based more on its practical aspect.

Despite this, Muslims in Northern India, including Nepal, maintain a positive attitude toward caste. Endogamy and hierarchical hierarchies are both characteristics of Muslim society. Hindus who follow the caste system are endogamous. Endogamy is practiced by Hindus primarily to preserve the sanity and purity of their blood, which aids in the preservation of the group's distinctive chastity. However, the responsibilities that have already been assigned establish a caste's superiority and inferiority, as well as its purity and contamination. As a result, the Brahman Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra castes perform distinct jobs (Res. 3). They are specialists in their fields. A Brahmin is considered sacred because he always serves the gods. To achieve personality perfection and mental and spiritual purity within the Hindu philosophical framework, however, they must engage in meditation or other Hindu rituals, as well as interaction and intermixing with those of modest means. The Sudras are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. They work in jobs that reflect their lower quality because they are of lower quality. The Kshatriyas and Vaishyas divide the Brahman and Sudra strata (Res. 2). If they mix with people of lower strata and lower quality,

the upper strata's characteristics will be lost. It gradually taints their blood by causing relative social effects.

Ashraf Arzal, as practiced by Muslims in India and Nepal, is a feudal concept and a byproduct of medieval India's feudalistic social structure. The Ashraf regard themselves as the higher caste among Muslims because they are of foreign descent and members of the ruling classes (Res. 1). As a result, they maintain their social dominance. All other Muslims are classified as Ashraf or Arzal which have a lower status than Ashraf. In terms of status, privileges, rights, and duties, Muslim caste division differs from Hindu caste division; the caste syndrome in Muslim society cannot be compared to that of Hindus (Faridi & Siddiqi, 1992). The remaining low castes are classified as Ajlaf, which means "unholy" or "degraded" in Arabic. Saiyad, Seikh, Mughal, and Pathan are among the Ashraf classes. The Arzal are a clean occupational caste that includes the Mansuri, Churihar, Manhar, Dafali, Hawali, Fakir, Gujar, Halwai, Ansari, Ranki, Khasgar, Kharadis, Lohar, Chidimar, Hazam, Rai, and Teli. The Arzals are the untouchable and impure groups. As a result, they are subordinate to all other Muslims who are ostensibly of high social standing. Although, as previously stated, the Muslim caste system is loosely based on the Hindu model, it does have caste-like components in practice. It is condemned by religious dogma. It also exists as a result of the high status of foreign-born Muslims, particularly Arabs, Turks, and Afghans. 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).

The entire social framework of the Muslim community in India has a profound impact on Muslims in Nepal. As a result, they exhibit a number of caste-like characteristics. This phenomenon persists, even among Kathmandu's Muslims. Because the Hindu tradition assigns the Muslim a lower status, i.e., untouchable

impure in Hindu society, they engage in both high and low behavior within themselves. However, it is critical to understand that the Muslim concept of caste is not based on popular notions of cleanliness and contamination (Res. 3). As a result, caste is not as strong in Muslim society as it is in Hindu society. As a result, no Muslim should pollute another Muslim. As a result, there are no distinction-based social divisions or disparities based on distinctions, advantages, or descent (Res. 2).

However, in Muslim society, there is also the practice of purity and impurity, which contradicts this notion. For example, the modern structure of Muslim society has resulted in the disappearance of a number of elements that are opposed to the practice of the caste system. As a result, it now includes additional features and components. Professionalism, professional specialization, a perception of contamination and purity, hierarchy, endogamous marriages, and so on have all been passed down to the modern Muslim (Thapa, 1997). However, it is true that there are no Muslims who are ritually clean in the same way that Brahmins are. Anyone with religious training can serve as an imam and lead the congregation. As a result, there is a growing trend in Muslim society of many people from lower castes enrolling in religious institutions (Madrashas), leading to an increase in the number of Imams or religious leaders from those castes (Res. 2). Even if they participate in religious rituals, they face some social constraints. They must also adhere to endogamy. As a result, it establishes their actual social standing. However, it is clear that this practice has contributed to the Muslim community's distortion of Islam's fundamental doctrines and egalitarian values (Res. 1).

Caste among the Muslim's of Miya Patan

In Nepal, the entire worldview of the Muslim community is derived from that of their Indian counterparts. The majority of Nepal's Muslims are from India's northern states. The Hanafi sub-sect is the one in which the majority of Nepalese

Muslims believe. At the same time, a sizable proportion of Nepali Muslims practice or are influenced by the Deoband school of thought (Thapa, 1995). The majority of Indian Muslims today are the descendants of converted Muslims (their forefathers converted from Hindu to Muslim, now known as Pasmandas) (Res. 1). Nepali Muslims are migrants who came from Tibet, Kashmir, and India. The vast majority are Indian immigrants. Nepali Muslims adhere to tradition and rituals as their counterpart follows in India. Caste system is a product of Indian Pasmanda Muslim. These days they are struggling for their identity.

Despite the fact that the holy Quran forbids any form of discrimination against people, Nepali Muslim culture continues to practice it in all three of its major settlements, including the Tarai region, the Western hill villages, and the Kathmandu valley. The Muslim community in Nepal is organized around the widely accepted Ashraf concept, which is used to identify superiors and inferiors (Thapa, 1995). There are untouchable and many castes. Because of pollution, their vocational specialization is low-level labor. On the basis of cleanliness, the so-called high caste Muslims discriminated against the soiled class by refusing to eat with them (Res. 3). However, caste distinction among Nepali Muslims in Pokhara is based on other factors such as blood purity, occupational requirements, and, to a lesser extent, religiosity. As a result, the current Muslim society in Pokhara, at least in terms of high and low, does not adhere to the holy text's directives for egalitarianism (Res. 2). The caste system in Pokhara is undeniably weak and lacks the same foundation as ideas of cleanliness and pollution. However, the concept of Ashraf is widely used by Muslims in Pokhara especially among the Barelvis and throughout Nepal, primarily to establish the community's status (Res. 2).

The Saiyads are adamant that they are first among equals. The Kashmiri Shah asserted their superiority by claiming to be members of the Saiyads groups. However,

even Pokhara's four higher groups compete with one another to claim superiority over the others. The Pokhara's Muslim population is made up of people from various castes, including the Shah, Khan, Hazam, Uddin, Sheikh, Mughal, Tarai Muslims, and others (Thapa,1997). Cultural practices of Muslims in Pokhara are rapidly changing as a result of urbanization. In contrast to the rural Muslims of Tarai and hill villages, urbanization and modernity both had a significant impact on establishing cultural traditions' fundamentals. Due to the modern outlook and other related elements such as education and rising exposure, the traditional view of caste in Muslim society has come under fire in recent years (Res. 3). Not only Muslims, but also their Hindu neighbors, change their attitudes toward Muslims and how they treat them in terms of social rank. The Muslim community in Pokhara is staunchly opposed to the four higher caste standards (Res. 1). The Ashraf claim a higher social status in society. In Pokhara, they also practiced pure and impure between various castes until a few years ago. Caste differences among Muslims in Pokhara are most visible in marital ties, occupation, and religiosity (Ojha, 2011). It was a reference to the Kashmiri Shah's superior status in the Kathmandu Muslim community.

However, Muslims in Pokhara do not face the same caste pressures. Even if the caste-parading aspect is only partially functional, it still works. The second requirement is an agreement on matrimonial allowances. At every level, caste is endogamous. Marriages between the four upper castes (Ashrafs) and those of lower status are traditionally prohibited. Even some of them are aware of their lower social status, so they do not use their actual castes. Even among the "four castes," there are different traditions. The Shahs are Saiyads, who consider themselves to be among the best (Thapa, 1995). Marriages were once restricted to members of the same status family. However, mixed marriages are now common among Muslim families.

The Hazams are responsible for providing water for ablution during weddings and feasts in Muslim families. When a couple marries, they send out invitations, and the Hazam is in charge of spreading word of any Muslim's death so that people can gather for Zanjara (Res. 3). Other Muslims saw this traditional job as lowering their status. All Muslims are treated equally, whether they are clean or unclean. There are differences between the Deobandhi and Bareilvi groups. Muslims of Miya Patan are Bareilvis and don't accept Deobandhi in their relationship. They are unable to marry because of their opposing religious beliefs. They accuse each other of being false Muslims and claim to be superior. In reality, their so-called religiosity keeps them away from having a long-term relationship.

Conclusion

Islam was divided into Sunni and Shia sects due to intellectual disagreements. The Sunni sect is practiced by the vast majority of Nepalese Muslims. Sunnis in Nepal are divided into numerous sub-sects based on their philosophical beliefs, including Deobandhi, Bareilvi, and Wahabi. Nepali Muslims are the descended of Indian immigrant, Tibetan, and Kashmiris. The majority of Nepali Muslims emigrated from India and adopted Islamic practices of their Indian counterparts. Muslims of Miya Patan are also the Indian migrant and follow Indian Islamic practice. Most of them follow Bareilvi school.

Islam is a religion that emphasizes God's sovereignty and Islamic brotherhood. The source of Islam's hierarchical prejudice is Arabic Muslims' superior sense of belonging to the Prophet family. Similarly, during India's Mughal dynasty, converted Muslims aided in the practice of caste hierarchies. The Arabs saw the Pasmandas, who had been converted from Hindu marginalized groups and scheduled castes, as having a lower rank in Muslim culture, resulting in hierarchical oppression.

The caste hierarchy among Muslims was also followed by Muslims of Pokhara who were following their Indian counterparts. The Kashmiri Muslims, as represented by the Saiyed family, have a sense of superiority, as evidenced by their marital practices. The practice of caste hierarchy has slowed as society has modernized and accepted inter-caste marriage. Such prejudice, in whatever form it takes, not only harms societal cohesion but also violates Islamic brotherhood principles.

References

- Ahmed, I. (1993). *Caste and social stratification among the Muslims*. Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Ansari, H. (1967). *Indian ethnic groups in the Nepal Tarai*. Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS).
- Banu, Q. (1980). *Introduction to Muslim in Nepal* (Un-published M.A. Thesis. Department of History, Tribhuvan University).
- Faridi, F.R. & Siddiqi, M. (1992). *The social structure of Indian Muslims*. Institute of Objective Studies.
- Khan, A.S. (2014). *Nepal Ra Nepali Musselman (Nepal and Nepali Muslims)*. Abdul Salam Khan.
- Ojha, N. (2011.) *A Study on Socio- Cultural Life of Muslims of Kathmandu* (Unpublished Research Report, Research Division). Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur.
- Sarfarazuddin, A. (1991). *Rural Muslims in transition*. South Asia Books.
- Seddon, D. (2018). *The Muslim communities of Nepal*. Adroit Publisher.
- Sijapati, M. (2013). *Islamic revival in Nepal religion and a new nation*. Routledge.
- The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. (2023). *online encyclopedia britannica*.
- Thapa, S. (1997). "Nikah The Muslim marriage," *Voice Of History*. Tribhuvan University Kirtipur.
- Thapa, S. (1995). Caste hierarchy: The inter-ethnic stratification in the Muslim society of Nepal. *Tribhuvan University Journal*, 13,
- Thapa, S. (1986). *A study of population and family planning among the Muslims in a Nepalese town*. Research Project, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur.
- Thapa, S. (1997). *Some aspects of Muslim minority in Nepal* (Un-Published Research Report). submitted to Research Division Tribhuvan University.
- Maknoon, M. (1997). Adam & Hawa ((peace be upon them) <http://www.islamawareness.net>.retrieved2022January.