

## ***Community Engagement: Nepali Muslims in Social Initiatives Promoting Religious Understanding***

Oleh:

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### ***Abstract***

*This study explores the role of Nepali Muslims in community engagement efforts aimed at promoting religious understanding in Nepal. This study uses a qualitative research technique to investigate how members of the Muslim community in Nepal take part in social activities aimed at addressing misunderstandings about Islam, promoting interfaith dialogue, and creating bridges with other religious groups. The research reveals the tactics, difficulties, and achievements of these activities through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and thematic analysis. It draws attention to the value of inclusive community involvement, the influence of sociopolitical settings, and the special contributions made by Nepali Muslims to more general initiatives aimed at promoting religious harmony and reconciliation. The results add to a more nuanced understanding of how minority-led grassroots initiatives might promote religious understanding in heterogeneous nations such as Nepal. For individuals who hold misconceptions about Muslims, this study will mark a significant milestone. Nepal is a great example for how different religious groups may coexist peacefully and harmoniously to create a common national identity without prejudice or hostility against one another. Other nations should take note of this.*

***Keywords:*** *Social initiatives; Religious coexistence; Minority groups; Grassroots efforts and Multicultural society Perspective*

### ***Abstrak***

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi peran Muslim Nepal dalam upaya pelibatan masyarakat yang bertujuan untuk mempromosikan pemahaman agama di Nepal. Penelitian ini menggunakan teknik penelitian kualitatif untuk menyelidiki bagaimana anggota komunitas Muslim di Nepal mengambil bagian dalam kegiatan sosial yang bertujuan untuk mengatasi kesalahpahaman tentang Islam, mempromosikan dialog antaragama, dan menciptakan jembatan dengan kelompok-kelompok agama lain. Penelitian ini mengungkapkan taktik, kesulitan, dan pencapaian kegiatan-kegiatan tersebut melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan analisis tematik. Penelitian ini menarik perhatian pada nilai keterlibatan masyarakat yang inklusif, pengaruh lingkungan sosial-politik, dan kontribusi khusus yang diberikan oleh Muslim Nepal pada inisiatif yang lebih umum yang bertujuan untuk mempromosikan kerukunan dan rekonsiliasi agama. Hasil penelitian ini menambah pemahaman yang lebih bernuansa tentang bagaimana inisiatif akar rumput yang dipimpin oleh kaum minoritas dapat mempromosikan pemahaman agama di negara-negara yang heterogen seperti Nepal. Bagi individu yang memiliki kesalahpahaman tentang Muslim, penelitian ini akan menandai tonggak sejarah yang signifikan. Nepal adalah contoh yang baik tentang bagaimana kelompok-kelompok agama yang berbeda dapat hidup berdampingan secara damai dan harmonis untuk menciptakan identitas nasional yang sama

tanpa prasangka atau permusuhan satu sama lain. Negara-negara lain harus memperhatikan hal ini.

**Kata kunci:** Inisiatif sosial; Hidup berdampingan secara religius; Kelompok minoritas; Upaya akar rumput; Perspektif masyarakat multikultural

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Community engagement is crucial in fostering mutual understanding, cooperation, and coexistence among diverse groups. Nepal is a home to Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Kirats, Christians, Sikhs, and Jains. According to the census 2021, 81.19% of Nepalese people identify as Hindu, 8.21% as Buddhist, and 5.09% as Muslim (CBS,2021).*

*In Nepal, a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multicultural nation, the Muslim community plays a vital role in social and religious discourse. While Hinduism and Buddhism are the majority, Islam, practiced by a minority, has become a focal point in efforts toward interreligious dialogue. The study of religious minorities like Muslims is especially important in countries with divergent ethnic groups (Banu,1980).*

*Nepali Muslims have a history of almost five hundred years, with the first arrivals being Kashmiree traders. Since the 15th century, different groups of Muslims have arrived, with the majority belonging to the Sunni sect. This paper explores the role of Nepali Muslims in*

*community engagement initiatives aimed at promoting religious understanding, tolerance, and social cohesion (Mishra,20260 B.S.).*

*Composition of Nepali Society; Nepal, a small Himalayan country, is home to a diverse population of various ethnic groups, including Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Kirats, Christians, Sikhs, and Jains. The 2021 census reported that 81.19% of the Nepalese population is Hindu, 8.21% are Buddhist, 5.09 % are matters and cultural behavior. Despite these challenges, the process of religious modernization has brought about perceptible changes in their attitudes. They have adopted indigenous features blended into their religion and culture, marking their presence in the mainstream of national culture. overwhelmingly Hindu, encounters with the penetration of majority culture have not occurred. Religious communal riots have rarely occurred, and Muslim neighbors often participate in Hindu festivals and celebrations, strengthening religious harmony in the country (Mishra,2023).*

*Classification of Nepali Muslims; Nepali Muslims are divided into the Sunni and Shias sects due to differences in belief. The majority of Muslims belong to the Sunni sect, with Shias being insignificant in population. The entire belief system in Nepal is borrowed from India, with a large number of Muslims trained or influenced by the orthodox Deoban School of thought (Thapa, 1997).*

*Native and foreign scholars have classified Nepali Muslims into different groups according to their residential status, such as Kashmiri Muslim, Terai Muslim, Hill Muslim, Tibetan Muslim, and Indian Muslim (Khan, 2071 B.S.). However, historical evidence does not support these classifications. Historical evidence shows that Nepali Muslims residing in hill, Terai, or Kathmandu areas are migrants from Tibet, Kashmir, and India Seddon,2018). They can't be classified according to their settlement, as they are descendants of Kashmiri Muslims, Tibetan Muslims, and Indian Muslims.*

*Kashmiri Muslims have an independent identity according to their indigenous features, while Hindusthani Muslims and Terai Muslims are the product of Indian immigration. Churautey Muslims, on the other hand,*

*do not have their indigenous features like Kashmiris and Tibetan Muslims. They are either the descendants of Hindusthani Muslim or Indian Muslim. Thus, Muslims of Nepal can be classified into three major groups according to their indigenous features.*

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAME**

*The framework of Social Capital theory provides a useful analysis of "Community Engagement: Nepali Muslims in Social Initiatives Promoting Religious Understanding". Social Capital Theory emphasizes the role of social networks, trust, and norms in facilitating cooperation within communities, which is crucial for fostering inter-religious dialogue and understanding. It focuses on the importance of relationships and networks in creating a sense of community and*

## **3. METHOD AND METHODOLOGY**

*The basis for this study is a qualitative analysis. This work employs an explanatory, descriptive, and analytical approach. Primary sources of information provide the foundation for this paper. An informal interview was done using an open-ended questionnaire to get firsthand knowledge about the subject. Likewise, participants observation*

*The entire topic described above has been arranged for more broad conversations. Conversations with academics, historians, and university professors have been planned. The primary strategy used to get the data was conversation. There were official and informal discussions with the concerned personalities.*

*Although historical references are included when appropriate, the majority of the material in this study comes from the current data. Generally, secondary information is obtained through library research. Proper use has been made of pertinent books, journal articles, websites, and related publications. For this study, all of the data that was gathered has been categorized, condensed, examined, and some reflection has been done.*

*The historical study of Community Engagement: Nepali Muslims in Social Initiatives Promoting Religious Understanding is the only issue covered in this paper. The social, political, legal, economic, and other facets are not covered in this paper.*

*Muslim (Census,2021), The Terai region is occupied by Indian-born people, including plane caste and tribes.*

*A significant number of Muslim people live in the southern part of the country, both in rural and urban areas. In hills Muslim population is very low comparing to the Terai the southern part of Nepal. The total Muslim population according to the 2021 census is 1.483 million, with Muslims constituting 5.09 % of the total population.(Census,2021). This increase is attributed to steady migration from the Indian plane to the Terai region. Four districts of the Terai, namely Banke, Kapilbastu, Parsa, and Rautahat, have over 50% of the Muslim population as Muslim- majority districts. The other five districts are Bara, Mahottarai, Dhanusa, Siraha, and Sunsari, and two districts Rupendehi and Sarlahi. constitutes significant number of Muslim population (Ojha,2016).*

*Comparing the Census 2001 and 2011, it was found that Buddhism decreased by 1.51 percent. Islam and Christianity increased by 0.26 and 0.97 percent respectively at the same time. Christianity, the late comer has rapidly grown up in the last decade compared to Islam, the first comer. It can be concluded that Islam never tried to convert other religion people (Ojha,2068 B.S.).*

*Muslims living in different geographical regions possess specific cultural features and beliefs or cultural*

*patterns. They vary even between different Muslim groups such as Kashmiri, Terai Muslims, Indian immigrants, hill Muslims, and Tibetan Muslims. The Kashmiri, who belong to the Barelvi sub-sect, adopt Sufism as their belief and are very liberal in religious or cultural matters. On the other hand, Terai Muslims or Indian immigrants are found to be more orthodox religious matters (Thapa,1997).*

*Nepali Muslims are fundamentally divided into Deobandi and the Barelvi School of thought, with some Muslims belonging to the Ahle Hadith Schools but not having separate mosques. The entire Nepali Muslim community belongs to the Hanafi School of the Sunni sect. Geography has had a greater impact on the cultural evolution in the country, which was synthesized with Hindu society and cultural tradition (Thapa,1997).*

*An Arabic book "Hudood Al' Alam" mentioned the term 'Nepal' as a trading partner of Arabia, and Muslims were not permanently settled in Nepal until the reign of King Ratna Malla. Muslims arrived in the 15th century and have continued to settle in Nepal ever since (Mishra,2060 B.S.).*

*Muslims, the third largest religion in Nepal, make up 5.09 % of the*

*total national population, live in different geographical regions, causing cultural differences and identity issues. The Muslims in Nepal have undergone various stages of culture-religious changes, with Hindu liberalism providing them a favorable ground to exist in the Hindu state. However, there are no constitutional and legal restrictions on their religious practice, making it a minority religion (Seddon, 2018).*

*Muslims in Nepal, particularly in the hills, are often surrounded by Hindus, leading to greater cultural change. The liberal attitude of the Barelvis, modernization in religious practice, lack of access to religious institutions, agricultural villages in remote areas, absence of proper religious training centers, and traditional thinking borrowed from Indian Muslims have led to religious transformation. Some Muslims have become more liberal, while others have become orthodox (Siddika,1995).*

*The Muslims living in different places hold both liberal and orthodox attitudes in religion and culture. Hill Muslims, Kashmiri, and Tibetan Muslims in Kathmandu and hill settlements are generally liberal in religious matters, while other communities in Kathmandu and Terai*

plane, such as Tarai Muslims and Indian immigrants, are orthodox in religious promoting collaboration. High levels of trust among community members can lead to greater cooperation in social initiatives, fostering environments where different religious groups can engage positively. Social capital theory supports the idea that engaged communities are more likely to participate in social initiatives, enhancing mutual understanding across religious lines (Putnam,1993). This foundational work of Robert Putnam describes the role that social capital plays in good governance and civic involvement. It offers a solid theoretical framework for analyzing community-based programs among Nepali Muslims that are meant to foster interfaith understanding.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

##### ***Understanding Community Engagement***

Community engagement involves the collective action of individuals and groups working together to address issues that affect their communities. In the context of religious minorities, engagement often centers on fostering dialogue, creating platforms for cooperation, and promoting social justice. For Nepali Muslims, such engagement is crucial in combating

*stereotypes, reducing religious tensions, and building bridges across religious divides ( Paneru,2023).*

##### ***Forms of Engagement***

*Nepali Muslims engage in various forms of community initiatives aimed at religious understanding. These include interfaith dialogue programs, educational outreach, social services, and participation in local governance. Through these activities, the Muslim community seeks to not only uplift its members but also contribute to a more harmonious and inclusive society.*

*Firstly, Nepali Muslims are different to Indian and Tibetans Muslims in term of their arrival. In India, Muslims came as invader. They invaded India, defeated the Petty state rulers and ruled them over centuries. But in Nepal, Nepali ruler, King Ratna Malla invited Muslims especially the Kashmire traders to settle in Nepal for Business with special prerogative right. They were allowed to build their Mosq in front of the Palace for their religious practice. Not only Malla King, most of the hilly states invited Muslim arm experts for arms and ammunicions for the war. They were given high rank in army. The basic*



*difference is that Nepali Muslims came to Nepal and settled here as invitees which is different to India and other countries (Ojha,2068 B.S.).*

### **Interfaith**

*Dialogue and Cooperation- Interfaith dialogue has been one of the most significant forms of community engagement for Nepali Muslims. By collaborating with Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian groups, the Muslim community has actively promoted conversations around shared values, peace, and coexistence. Organizations such as the Nepal Muslim Samaj and Nepal Interfaith Forum have been at the forefront of facilitating these discussions. These dialogues often take place in the form of seminars, workshops, and peace rallies, where leaders from various religious backgrounds come together to discuss their traditions and how they can work collectively toward social harmony (Mishra,2023).*

*These efforts are essential, especially in the context of global narratives around Islam, which have at times created misunderstandings and mistrust. Nepali Muslims, through these dialogues, not only address*

*misconceptions about their faith but also build relationships with other religious groups that transcend differences.*

*Educational Outreach and Madras Modernization Education plays a crucial role*

*1.in fostering long-term social change and understanding. Nepali Muslims have increasingly focused on educational outreach, not just within their community but also for the broader Nepali population. The modernization of madrasas (Islamic schools) has been a key initiative in this regard. Many madrasas have integrated secular subjects into their curriculum, ensuring that students receive a well-rounded education that includes both religious studies and modern subjects such as science, mathematics, and civic studies (Khan,2023). By opening up these institutions to students of other faiths and engaging in collaborative learning environments, the Muslim community promotes a narrative of inclusion and mutual respect. In addition, several Nepali Muslim scholars and leaders have initiated programs aimed at educating the public about Islamic teachings on peace, social justice, and compassion, further contributing to*

## 2.Social Services and Humanitarian

*Efforts Social service is another area where Nepali Muslims have made significant contributions to fostering religious understanding. Community-led initiatives such as charity drives, health camps, and disaster relief efforts often serve as platforms where individuals from various religious backgrounds come together to work toward common goals. During the 2015 Nepal earthquake, Muslim organizations actively participated in providing relief and rehabilitation to affected communities, irrespective of religious affiliations. These humanitarian efforts underscore the common human values shared across religious lines, thereby promoting unity and reducing religious divides. By engaging in service to the broader community, Nepali Muslims also challenge stereotypes of isolation or exclusivity that are sometimes attributed to minority religious groups (Mishra,2023).*

## 3.Political Participation and Advocacy

*While political participation is a more indirect form of community engagement, it is no less important in promoting religious understanding.*

*Nepali Muslims have increasingly taken part in local and national governance, advocating for the rights and representation of religious minorities. Through political activism and advocacy, the community pushes for policies that promote inclusivity, equal rights, and social justice. The participation of Nepali Muslims in political processes, particularly in the Terai region, where their population is more concentrated, has provided them with a platform to influence public discourse on issues such as religious tolerance, secularism, and the importance of diversity in national identity (Khan,2071 B.S.).*

### **Hindu- Muslim Religious Syncretism**

*Nepal, a Hindu-dominated secular state, has a unique legal system that has evolved from sacred Hindu texts such as Smritis, Vedas, and other texts. This uniform legal system allows religious freedom for people, regardless of their religious or ethnic background. Muslims in Nepal have lived in a Hindu environment since the 15th century (Hoffer,2004).*

*Religious syncretism between Hindu and Islam has been evident in Nepal since the time of King Prithivi*



*Narayan Shah's regime (1743-1775). He recorded the "Divya Upadesh" (divine message) which endorsed his kingdom as a land of Hindus, contrasting with Mughal rule. The people of Nepal made it a custom not to drive out the cow, the national animal, from their fields in the south direction to stop its entry into Mughal land(Mishra,2023).*

*The first Rana Prime Minister, Jang Bahadur, expanded the "Divya Upadesh" and framed the "Muluki Ain" (law of land) in 1854 A.D. for strict implementation of the caste order- based Hindu Social code, listing Muslims as impure and untouchables. The people of Nepal tolerated Muslims with restrictions, allowing only "raw and dry" eatables to be eaten from their hands (Hoffer,2004). The Muslims of Nepal strictly followed the Nepal code of 1854 and accepted lower social status as loyal citizens, maintaining a low profile under the Hindu Monarchy system of governance. The end of the Rana regime in 1951 and the establishment of multi-party democracy did not significantly change the social status of Muslims. The situation remained the same until 1959 when King Mahendra dismissed B.P.Koirala's government in 1960 and introduced a party-less Panchayat system(Ojha,2023). He replaced the 1854*

*code in 1963, providing equal citizen status to the Muslims. Although the new code allowed Muslims to practice their religion freely, the ban on conversion or dissolution of marriage remained as it was in 1854 (Hoffer,2004). The third religious group in Nepal, Muslims, were allowed to practice their faith under certain restrictions, debarred from propagating Islam or following Islamic code Shariat. It is remarkable how a significant number of followers of Islam compromised with anti-Shariat (Islamic laws) and lived peacefully in Nepal for centuries (Bhandari,2023).*

### ***Challenges Faced by Nepali Muslims in Community Engagement***

*Despite their efforts, Nepali Muslims face several challenges in their community engagement initiatives. These challenges stem from both internal and external factors. Externally, widespread misconceptions about Islam, fueled by global media narratives and regional political tensions, pose significant barriers to interreligious dialogue. Internally, the Muslim community in Nepal is itself diverse, comprising various ethnic and cultural groups, which can sometimes lead to fragmentation and differing priorities within the community. (Bhandari,2023)*

*Additionally, the lack of resources*

*and institutional support for minority groups in Nepal can limit the reach and impact of community engagement initiatives. Government policies, while officially supportive of religious diversity, often fail to provide adequate representation or protection for religious minorities, further complicating efforts toward promoting religious understanding (Gaize,1975).*

### ***The Role of Nepal Muslim Organizations in Promoting Religious Tolerance***

*Nepal Muslim Samaj is a prominent organization that has been involved in promoting interfaith harmony in Nepal. By organizing seminars and workshops that bring together religious leaders from various communities, the organization creates platforms for dialogue and understanding. One of its most successful initiatives involved a series of peace- building workshops held in the aftermath of the 2006 People's Movement, which saw increased tensions between different religious and ethnic groups. The workshops focused on educating participants about the commonalities between different religious teachings and encouraging cooperation toward nation-building*

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(Anasari,2024).

### ***The Impact of Madrasa Reform in the Terai Region***

*In the Terai region, where a significant portion of Nepal's Muslim population resides, madrasa reform has been a key driver of religious understanding and social cohesion. The inclusion of secular subjects in the madrasa curriculum has allowed Muslim students to engage with the broader educational landscape of Nepal, breaking down barriers of religious exclusivity. The reforms have also fostered collaborations between Muslim and non-Muslim educational institutions, facilitating the exchange of ideas and promoting mutual respect (Alam,2024). In Nepal, where the majority population is*

### ***5. CONCLUSION***

*The engagement of Nepali Muslims in social initiatives aimed at promoting religious understanding is a crucial component of the broader effort to create a peaceful, inclusive, and harmonious society. Through interfaith dialogues, educational outreach, humanitarian efforts, and political participation, the Muslim community has actively contributed to fostering religious tolerance and reducing social tensions in Nepal. While challenges remain, the efforts of Nepali Muslims to promote*



*mutual understanding and coexistence offer valuable lessons for other religious and ethnic minority groups seeking to engage in similar initiatives. Moving forward, increased institutional support, public awareness, and continued collaboration between religious communities will be key to sustaining these positive developments.*

*The active involvement of Nepali Muslims in community engagement and social initiatives aimed at promoting religious understanding serves as a vital bridge in fostering peaceful coexistence and tolerance in Nepal's diverse society. Their efforts, rooted in the principles of Islamic teachings on compassion and respect, emphasize the significance of interfaith dialogue and collaboration in addressing common social challenges. The participation of Nepali Muslims in such initiatives highlights the community's role not just as passive participants but as proactive agents in shaping a more inclusive and harmonious society. Moreover, these initiatives are crucial in dismantling stereotypes and misconceptions about the Muslim community, both within Nepal and globally. By focusing on shared values and building networks with other religious and cultural groups, Nepali Muslims are contributing to a*

*more nuanced understanding of Islam and its teachings. This engagement underscores the importance of mutual respect and empathy in cultivating religious harmony, especially in a country marked by ethnic and religious diversity.*

*Overall, the commitment of Nepali Muslims to these social causes illustrates the potential of community-led efforts to create sustainable change. It demonstrates how localized, grassroots initiatives can foster greater religious understanding and social cohesion, serving as a model for other communities grappling with similar challenges. Through these ongoing efforts, the Nepali Muslim community continues to play an integral role in promoting peace, understanding, and unity in the wider societal fabric.*

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