

FIELD BULLETIN

Muslim Youths in Banke and Kapilvastu

Background

Muslims in Nepal are found in greatest numbers in the *Tarai* districts. Although they constituted a mere 2.7% of the total population in 1981, their numbers are increasing; rising to 3.3% in 1991 and to 4.27% in the 2001 census¹. This increasing number may be due to their higher fertility and growth rates² as well as the gradual reduction in undercounting as the previous censuses were often criticized by minority groups. Although the 2011 census results are yet to be published given this increasing trend it is likely that at present Muslims constitute no less than six percent of the population. As noted below, in spite of being a significant minority, their socio-economic conditions remain poor and their numbers belie their visibility. In a fast growing population, the number of children and youth are usually high in the typical bottom heavy age pyramid of demographic structure. It is noteworthy that nearly 30% of Nepal's population is between 15-29 years old³. Given the higher fertility rate amongst Muslims their percentage is likely to be even higher.

This field bulletin on Muslim youths in the two districts (Banke and Kapilvastu) with the highest proportion of Muslim population (21.10% and 19.42% respectively) in the country, examines the situation of some Muslim communities in Nepal.

Muslim Settlement in Nepal⁴

The first group of Muslims arrived in Kathmandu from Kashmir during the reign of Ratna Malla (1484-1520).⁵ They were generally well-educated and as Indian Muslims spoke Urdu but also learned the local language. Some joined government services whilst others became small businessmen.

The second group of Muslims to enter Kathmandu Valley were those of Indian origin. They first arrived during the reign of Pratap Malla (1641-1674), who allowed them to erect a separate mosque⁶. This group was invited by the rulers to manufacture military armament and remained in the hills as makers of agricultural implements, utensils and ornaments. The descendants of these migrants are known as 'Churaute' or bangle-sellers although a majority of them later became farmers. Today these hill Muslims are spread across the districts of Gorkha, Tanahu, Kaski, Syangja, Palpa, Arghakhachi, Pyuthan and Dailekh.

Another large group of Muslims came to Nepal with the Queen of Oudh after her husband was killed by the British during the *Sepoy* mutiny of 1857. Muslims in Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur became Nepali when these districts were ceded from the Kingdom of Oudh to Nepal by the British as punishment to Oudh Nawab who sided with the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and gifted to the friendly Nepali kingdom.

¹ Central Bureau of Statistics 1981 and 2001.

² Population Dynamics of Muslims in Nepal: Dr, Vikash Raj Satyal, Statistician, 2003; Research article on Demographic, socio-economic, and cultural factors affecting fertility differentials in Nepal: Ramesh Adhikari, 2010

³ Estimated calculation based on Single Age Population Projection, CBS, 2010

⁴ Muslims of Nepal: R Upadhyay, 2007; Nepali Muslims; Muslims in Nepal: Dirgha Raj Prasai, Nov 2011

⁵ Sharma, Sudhindra: How the crescent fares in Nepal, Himal South Asian, May 1995

⁶ The mosque is now known as "Jame Masjid" and is located near Ratnapark in Kathmandu.

Muslim migrants of Tibetan origin include both *Ladakhis*⁷ and those from Tibet. The latter arrived mostly after in 1959. These Tibetan Muslims are indistinguishable from their Tibetan Buddhist counterparts in their language and dress. Many of them are engaged in the trade of Chinese consumer durables and curios.

Human Development and Human Deprivation among Muslims

Muslims in Nepal have the second lowest Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.401, just slightly higher than the Madhesi Dalits. Poverty remains high⁸ and the average per capita income is low at NRs. 10,200, which is only half of the country's average. For example, the rural Brahmin-Chhetri group's income, while considerably lower than their urban counterparts, is still significantly higher than urban Muslims⁹. Consequently the whole Muslim community, irrespective of geographic location are generally poor. The low HDI of Muslims is also reflective of their low educational attainment which hinders their representation and participation and in turn perpetuates their exclusion. In 2006 the adult literacy rate¹⁰ was 30% among the Muslim population, with the rate for Muslim women being 26%.

Education of Muslim children

Though the literacy rate of the Muslim population increased by 12.4% during 1991-2001¹¹, it remains below the national literacy rate. Before the 1940s Muslims were not allowed to attend any Nepali schools and even after 1940, conservative Muslims in the past did not allow their children, especially girls, to receive education in mainstream schools¹². Interlocutors noted that whilst the situation is changing, isolationist tendencies still exist among Muslims especially in rural areas and conservative urban communities. Many families continue to favour mosque based Koran education and/or Madrasa¹³ education.

Lack of recognition of Madrasa education

Madrasas follow their own curriculum and the education they provide is not in synch with mainstream education. Interlocutors, including academics, in Banke and Kapilvastu districts opined that poverty, religious practices, gender discrimination and the government's slow-pace in linking Madrasa with the mainstream education¹⁴ are the major factors for the disconnect, resulting in lack of opportunities for the community. So far the District Education Office (DEO) has mainstreamed 96 Madrasas out of 126 in Nepalgunj whilst only 49 Madrasas out of 185 in Kapilvastu districts are mainstreamed.

According to Maulana Mansoor Ahmad Aarafi¹⁵, "Madrasas are funded by donations and *Zakat*¹⁶ from the Muslim community. Most of these Madrasas lack proper infrastructure, furniture, electricity, toilets and

⁷ *Muslims of Tibet*: Masood Butt, 1994. *Ladakh* is an ancient Tibetan kingdom that became part of Indian Kashmir only in the mid-19th century.

⁸ According to Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS 2003/04), the poverty rate of Muslim is 41%

⁹ UNDP: Nepal Human Development Report 2009, UNDP

¹⁰ Nepal Human Development Report 2009, p.156, Table no. 3

¹¹ According to CBS national survey, literacy rate of Muslim population reached 34.7% in 2001 compared to 22.4% in 1991. Current national literacy rate is 53.7%

¹² *Muslims in Nepal: Few, and Unreached*, Wesley Kawat, Sep 2011

¹³ Madrasa education contents are based on Islamic faith and code of conduct. The main objective of the Madrasa is to make the children true followers of Islam and enable them to lead their life in a true Islamic way. So the teaching-learning process and practice are Islamic. The students are bound to follow the Islamic code of conduct practically as long as while they stay in the Madrasa. (Research paper on *Access of Muslim Children in Education*, Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development, Tribhuvan University, July 2003)

¹⁴ As per the commitment of Government of Nepal (GoN) to provide quality basic and primary education for all by 2015 as per the spirit of the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), GoN has adapted policy to mainstream other educational institutions such as, Madrasa, Gumba and Asram. Education For All (EFA) is a global movement led by UNESCO, aiming to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015. The EFA goals also contribute to the global pursuit of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially MDG 2 on universal primary education and MDG 3 on gender equality in education, by 2015.

¹⁵ Maulana Mansoor Ahmad Aarafi is National President of Madrasa Islamiya Sangh, Nepal

¹⁶ In Islam, *Zakat* is the mandatory donations of a set amount of (2.5% of one's wealth per year) wealth, cash, gold, silver and commercial items to charity.

drinking water facilities. Students have to sit on the floor.” According to the Maulana only two or three Madrasas in Nepalgunj were provided support from the DEO in 2010, for the maintenance and construction of toilets. According to recent news¹⁷, DEO Banke has cut off the government grant for 10 Madrasas in the district for various reasons.

Maulana Arafai also noted that because Madrasa academic certificates¹⁸ are not recognized by the government, Madrasa graduates cannot apply for further studies. Ejaz Ahmad of Nepalgunj who spent nine years in a Madrasa to complete a Hafez Degree, explained that this has not helped him to get a job, nor could he continue his study in a Nepali mainstream educational institution.

Female education is still frowned upon

Gender discrimination is still largely prevalent in Nepal¹⁹ and among the Muslim population it is perhaps more pronounced. Moinuddin Ansari, a college lecturer at MM Campus in Nepalgunj, stated “the Muslim community is still hesitant to send their daughters to schools and colleges with co-education.”

Khushnuma Khan, an undergraduate student in Kapilvastu agreed, stating that “because of the traditional mindset of parts of the Muslim communities, they are reluctant to provide education to girls and prevent them from attending co-education facilities.”

Box 1: Case stories – Family and neighbours determines our destiny

Shahida Shah (23) of Nepalgunj had to drop her idea to go to college after her SLC because her neighbours started to make negative comments about her. Addressing the family pride and future complications when getting married, her parents prevented her from going to college.

Sabina Khaaton (18) of Kapilvastu, after successfully passing her SLC examination, joined 10+2 for her higher studies. However, she is unsure if she can continue her education because her family is putting pressure on her to get married.

Poverty forcing youths to abandon their studies

According to interlocutors poverty prevents many Muslim children from going to school, or pressures them to abandon their studies at a young age to assist their family financially. Mohammad Ibrahim of Kapilvastu explained, “I gave up my studies when I was in grade eight, because our family was unable to pay the school fee.” Similarly, Salman Rai of Nepalgunj dropped out of school at the age of 13 to learn automobile maintenance skills at a local workshop so that he could contribute to his family’s income. Muslims in Nepal have among the lowest employment to population ratio (15+) in Nepal at 76% in both 1998/99 and 2008²⁰. Hence they are mostly engaged in low paying, unorganized informal sector employment (76%) and also spend the highest number of hours at work²¹.

Muslim youths become breadwinner at a young age

As noted above, a high level of poverty and low level of education is prevalent in the Muslim community. Their poverty level has not significantly changed over the last 15 years²². They have very low participation as employees in the formal sector. Their presence in

Box 2: Case stories – Family responsibility at tender age

Mohammad Nijammudin, aged 18, repairs rickshaws in Kapilvastu. He earns NRs. 150-200 a day and is the only breadwinner in his family of nine members. He says, “Everything is becoming more expensive and we hardly manage to get food for the day.”

Kahkasa Bano of Kapilvastu at the age of 17 realized that she needed to help support her family because her father was severely ill. She therefore started to work as a computer operator to help feed her parents and younger brothers and sisters.

¹⁷ <http://www.thehimalayantimes.com/fullNews.php?headline=Action+against+Madrasas&NewsID=291362>

¹⁸ E.g. Hafez, Aalim, Qari and Mufti

¹⁹ Nepal Human Development Report 2009, UNDP-Nepal, Kathmandu 2009

²⁰ National Labour Force Survey NLFS 2008)

²¹ National Living Standards Survey NLSS 2003/2004

²² The poverty level of Muslim population was 41.3% in 2003 compared to 43.7% in 1995/96 (Nepal Human Development Report 2009, p.46)

government, private, development and corporate sectors is nominal.²³

Interlocutors noted that most of Muslim youths are involved in small-scale technical or skilled jobs, e.g. vehicle, rickshaw or bicycle repairs or tailoring, as well as in labour-intensive jobs such a rickshaw-driver, daily-wage worker or small-scale street vendors out of which they make an average of NRs. 100-200 a day. This reflects the low average per capita income of Nepali Muslims²⁴.

Foreign Employment: an attraction to Muslim youths

According to interlocutors, foreign employment is the biggest attraction for Muslim youths in Kapilvastu, but not necessarily so for the group in Banke. This may be because of more opportunities being available in Banke's urban centre, Nepalgunj. Almost every household interviewed in Kapilvastu district had a family member working in the Gulf, which may also be a factor that encourages youths in Kapilvastu to prioritize overseas migration. Among many push factors noted was the fact that the lack of education and skills prevents many Muslim youths from getting a job. Low paying and informal sector jobs often do not pay enough to support the traditionally large families. According to Maulana Bashir Ahmad²⁵ of Kapilvastu, "Remittances earned in the Gulf are mainly used to pay for weddings, construct houses, purchase of land and repayment of the loans that they had taken to go abroad."

Box 3: Foreign employment – The preferred choice

Rizwan Ahmad of Kapilvastu has been working in Qatar as a tailor for the past two years. He could not continue his education beyond grade 9 because his father could no more afford the school fees. He therefore began working in his father's tailor shop. Because he saw no improvement in his lifestyle for ten years, he decided to go abroad seeking employment.

Concluding remarks

Youths are the future of a nation and their respective communities. They are also the largest segment of the population pyramid. They are a volatile group that can bring positive changes but if disillusioned can cause instability and violence. As noted above, the current situation of Muslim youths in two of the most Muslim populated districts is not encouraging and if not addressed reasonably promptly may threaten Nepal's ongoing peace process.

²³ Nepal Labour Force Survey 2008, CBS, Kathmandu, Nepal; Staff Composition and Diversity...AIN, Kathmandu, Nepal 2011

²⁴ Average Per capita income by Caste & Ethnicity, Nepal – 2003/04 (DFID & World Bank, 2005)

²⁵ Maulana Bashir Ahmad is a member of Islami Library in Taulihawa Municipality, Kapilvastu

Disclaimer: This field bulletin is prepared following a brief field study and also uses secondary data. The information presented in this field bulletin does not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Although the RCHCO aims to confirm all information independently, occasional factual inaccuracies can occur.

United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator's Office (UN RCHCO)

GPO Box: 107, UN House, Pulchowk, Kathmandu

Email: rchco.nepal@one.un.org

Phone: +977 1 5523200, Fax: +977 1 5523991

Visit the UN Nepal Information Platform at <http://www.un.org.np>