

## A Study of Sculptures Reveals Hindu-Buddhist Religious Harmony in Nepal

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### Abstracts

In a multi-religious country like Nepal, religious harmony is essential for sustaining peace and calmness. Religious discord in society may result if religious concord is not addressed. Even though Nepal is a secular country with a Hindu majority, Buddhists remain crucial and inseparable elements of Nepalese society. They have lived in religious harmony in Nepal. During the period, there were no religious riots or tensions between Hindus and Buddhists. According to the Principle of Religious concord, when two cultures meet and interact, religious ideas will be exchanged, with the dominant culture prevailing. Harmony in cultures and customs evolved in Nepal for a variety of reasons. Because of their social acceptance and respect in society, Buddhists have become a vital part of it. Buddhism is seen as a component of Hindu philosophy by Hindus, and vice versa. In recent years, however, they have sought to differentiate themselves by religiously violating decades of peace and harmony. Nepal, a country with diverse religious traditions, has faced occasional tensions between different groups, including Hindu-Muslim, Buddhist-Hindu relations, Christian minorities, indigenous beliefs, and political dimensions. These tensions are often linked to socio-political issues, competition over religious sites, and accusations of proselytization or conversion activities. Recently in Nepalganj, Muslims disturbed Hindus during Deepawali and Hindu disturbed in *tajia* procession. The purpose of this research is to examine the critical factors that

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contribute to religious harmony in a multi-faith society, as well as the reflection of religious harmony in Nepali sculptures. An in-depth interview and library research technique are used to investigate the topic of religious harmony. The goal of this article is to examine the underlying factors that lead to religious harmony in a multi-religious community, as well as its reflection in Nepali sculptures. This study also looks at the elements that influence harmony in the setting of Nepali sculptures. As a result, the conversation strives to foster long-term religious harmony between Nepal's Hindu and Buddhist religious communities. The findings may motivate them to keep strong connections.

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### **Introduction**

Nepal is home to many different ethnic groups. Many castes, ethnic, linguistic, and religious groupings have ancestral roots in Nepal. The Hindu community of Nepal makes up the great bulk of the country's population. There are many other religious people in Nepal. According to the 2021 census, there are 142 caste/ethnic groups and 124 mother tongue languages (CBS, 2021). Nepali is the first language of 44.6 per cent of the population. There are ten religion categories, according to the 2021 census. Hindu is the dominant religion of Nepal. About 80 percent People follows Hinduism. The other common faiths are Sikhism (609), Buddhism (9%) (2,396,099), Islam (4.4%) (1,162,370), Kirat (3.1%) (807,169), Christianity (1.4%), Prakriti (0.5%) (121,982), Bon (13,006), Jainism (3,214), Bahai (1,283), and Sikhism (1.4%) (mof.gov.np). Different religious groups make up the Nepali national population.

Religious harmony refers to the blending of many religious ideas and practices. It is the merging of diverse faiths, cultures, rituals, and ideas. According to the Principle of Religious harmony, when two cultures meet and interact, religious ideas will be exchanged, with the dominant culture prevailing. Cultural harmony and customs evolved in Nepal for a variety of reasons (Charles, 2020).

In India and China, religious harmony can also be seen in society but not in the sculptures. During the time of Ashoka, India and China were the epicenters of

religious harmony (<https://www.khanacademy.org>). In Tibet, the traditional Bon religion coexisted with Buddhism but later on it changed. In Nepal, the Lichhavi era was a golden age for religious harmony. The Lichhavis are completely Hindu, however, they hold a high reverence for Buddhism (Shrestha, 2005). The blending of Buddhism with Hindu art was the major attraction of the period. The Malla rulers created several statues which respect the opposite religion and reflect religious harmony. Even during the Shah Period, religious harmony was visible in Nepali art. Nepal's religious harmony between Hindus and Buddhists is rooted in shared beliefs, mutual respect, and shared religious sites. This harmony is exemplified by the syncretic blend of Hinduism and Buddhism known as "Buddhist-Hindu syncretism," which allows for a fluid exchange of religious ideas. Nepal's numerous temples and monasteries reflect architectural and artistic influences from both traditions, highlighting the shared cultural heritage of the two communities. Festivals like Dashain and Tihar, celebrated by both religions, foster unity and mutual respect. Sculptures in Nepal are integral to the social framework, reflecting religious devotion, cultural identity, and historical continuity. They serve as religious icons, cultural artifacts, focal points for community gatherings, and historical continuity, narrating stories of dynasties, religious movements, and artistic innovations that have shaped Nepali society (Puri, 2019).

What one sees in Nepal goes beyond religious tolerance; it may be called religious acceptance among the many communities. People of many ethnic and religious backgrounds worship common deities in addition to clan or family deities. Each religion recognizes and respects the other's culture and traditions. Many Hindus often visit Buddhist Shrines, believing Buddha to be an incarnation of Vishnu and celebrating their festivals as Hindu festivals (Puri, 2019). All major religious festivals of various religious organizations are designated as holidays. Religious harmony has been shown in temples, paintings, and even sculpture.

Theologically, Buddhists and Hindus differ. However, in Hindu civilization, Buddha is worshipped as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, and Buddhism is a component of Hindu religion, as indicated by Nepalese art and architecture, as well as temple sculpture. Such concerns have yet to be adequately investigated

Buddhists and Hindus coexist in distinct geographical areas. Their belief system, rites, and rituals may vary from area to region and sect to sect, yet they all follow the same religion: Buddhism (Puri, 2019). Buddhists, notably the Theravadis,

strove to distance themselves from Hindus, however other sects, as seen by Nepali artwork, accept Hinduism as their own faith. Scholars have not paid enough attention to the religious harmony between Hindu and Buddhist sculpture, and it has not yet been scientifically explored.

No comprehensive research on religious harmony in Nepali art has been published, except by K. M. Shrestha, Uddav Puri, Niranjana Ojha, Mohd Ikhwan Izzat Zulkefli, and Charles Taylor. So far, all available works are concentrated only on the issue of syncretism. Academics and other researchers have not prioritized the theme of religious harmony in Nepali art when defining study concerns. These are generic studies that do not discuss harmony in Nepali sculpture. All of this literature is evaluated before doing research. All of these sources are assessed before commencing the inquiry.

K. M. Shrestha (2005). "Religious Syncretism and the Context of Buddhism in Medieval Nepal" discusses religious syncretism between Hindu and Buddhist religious groups in depth. This paper focuses on religious peace in medieval Nepal. It has nothing to do with sculpting.

"Towards ensuring inter-religious harmony in a multi-religious society of Perak," by Zulkefli, M.I, Endut, M. N. A, Abdullah, M. R. T. L, and Baharuddin, A. (2018), addressed the state's religious harmony. This research emphasizes the significance of components like as acceptance, understanding, collaboration, as well as right and justice, in maintaining religious harmony in a multi-faith society, but it does not discuss harmony in sculpture. Puri, U. (2019), "Religious and Cultural Syncretism in Nepal Based on the Nation's Laws," investigates the themes of religious and cultural harmony among Hindu-Buddhist religious groups in Nepal. It simply evaluates the key laws in the country that are responsible for religious syncretism. Puri, U. (2019), "Religious and Cultural Syncretism: A Study of Swoyambhu," investigates the sociocultural syncretism that exists between Hindu and Buddhist religious communities. It is primarily concerned with the worshipping attitudes of two religious' communities. Charles, T. (2020), "A Revisitation of Religious Syncretism in Twentieth Century Yemen" which focuses on religious syncretism in Yemen but does not address religious harmony in the sculptures of different religious groups. Ojha, N. (2021) points out the inter-religious harmony between the Hindu-Muslim religious group of Nepal but doesn't cover its reflection on sculpture.

These diverse themes give significant information on numerous facets of religious harmony, but prior research has not addressed the reflection of harmony in Nepali sculptures and temples. As a result, the research gap created by prior studies has been adopted as the research challenge in this study. These materials do not provide answers to the research's issues but rather serve to bridge theoretical gaps. This research aims at identifying several unidentified problems in the concerned research.

Some national and international papers and studies sought to investigate the topic of religious harmony among Nepal's diverse religious sects, but they did not address harmonic reflection on Nepali sculpture.

The purpose of this study is to discover some unidentified concerns of religious harmony in Nepali sculptures.

The study seeks to answer the following question:

1. The religious harmony in Hindu-Buddhist sculptures is the beauty of Nepali society.
2. Interreligious peace between Hindus and Buddhists is seen in Nepali sculpture.

The goal of this study is -

1. To evaluate the religious confluence in Hindu-Buddhist art.
2. To look at interreligious peace in Nepali sculpture

### **Method and Materials**

The descriptive and analytical methods are used in this study. It drew on both original and secondary sources. The relevance of the field research and in-depth interviews in gathering primary data has been emphasized. For information, the researcher reviewed different papers, books, reports, and other written materials, as well as several local social/religious groups and organizations, and experts. Primary sources have received special attention. The observation, interview, and conversation methods were used to acquire firsthand data from relevant stakeholders. In this study, the theoretical framework of Emile Durkheim's religion theory was used. The library research approach is mostly utilized for secondary information. Books, journal papers, internet websites, and relevant publications have been correctly cited. For this research, all of the material gathered has been categorized, summarized, and examined, and some reflection has taken place.

This research is restricted to a historical examination of religious harmony between Nepali Hindu and Buddhist sculptures. The social, political, legal, economic, and other dimensions of religious harmony and other religions are not included in this work.

### **Discussion**

Nepal, a tiny Himalayan country, is home to many casts, ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. Nepal's Hindu population constitutes the vast majority of the country's population. In addition, there are religious minorities from different religions who live in Nepal. When we look at Nepali sculptures, we see that the majority of them are dedicated to different sects of Hindu deities (Tamang, 2022). Buddhist temples are few and far between in Kathmandu and elsewhere. Religious folks worship their deities at these temples according to their religion. A Hindu worships the God within a temple as the Hindu God, but a Buddhist worships the same God as his/her Buddhist deities. It is not just practiced in Kathmandu Valley, but across Nepal (Lama, 2022).

During the Li Chhavi dynasty in Nepal, Buddhism was significantly more prevalent. The Lichhavis are the traditional Hindus, although they have a high regard for Buddhism. Many Buddhist temples were erected and sculptures were carved in Kathmandu during this period. The main appeal of this time was the incorporation of Buddhism into Hindu art. Such fusion may be found in numerous temples erected during the Lichhavi era (Ojha, 2016). Buddhism and Hinduism have coexisted in Nepal for centuries due to shared cultural and historical roots, syncretism, and religious tolerance. This coexistence is facilitated by shared heritage concepts like karma, dharma, and reincarnation (Puri, 2019). Over time, these religions have influenced each other, leading to a syncretic blend known as Buddhist-Hindu syncretism. Nepal's long tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism is supported by historical rulers and religious leaders. Sculptures in Nepal often depict elements of religious harmony and syncretism through iconographic blending, architectural integration, and artistic expression. Ajima of Swayambhu, Buddhanilkantha Temple, Changu Narayan Temple of Bhaktapur, and many other temples and sculptures demonstrate the religious syncretism between Hindu and Buddhist religious groups in Nepal (Ojha, 2016).

### **Fusion of Buddhism in Hindu Temple and Vice-Versa**

The shrine of the mythical Manjushree Bodhisattva, a Buddhist shrine to Buddhists and Hindus who worship the shrine as that of Devi Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom, is located in the western part of Kathmandu. Not only Buddhists but also Hindus, revere the shrines in the Swayambhu complex. Swayambhu Stupa was erected by Vrishava Deva, a Hindu Licchavi King, according to historical sources (Puri, 2020). Swayambhu Nath is a well-known Buddhist sacred place in Kathmandu Valley. It is also known as Simbhu in the local language, is derived from the term Singgu, which means self-sprung' (Ojha, 2016). It is one of the most holy Buddhist pilgrimage places for the indigenous Newars. It is the second most important sacred location for Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists after Buddha. The complex includes a stupa as well as several shrines and temples, some of which date back to the Licchavi dynasty (Puri, 2019). The iconography of Swayambhu Nath is derived from the Vajrayana school of Newar Buddhism. However, the structure is also significant to Buddhists in many schools and is adored by Hindus (Puri, 2019). According to the Gopalrajvamsabali, it was founded at the beginning of the 5th century CE by King Vrishvadeva, the great-grandfather of King Manadeva (464-505 CE). This appears to be verified by a broken stone inscription discovered at the site, which suggests that construction was ordered in 640 CE by King Vrisharvadeva (Puri, 2020). This Temple displayed a Harmonic reflection.

Another popular temple is famous for Lord Vishnu- the Hindu God and was built during the Licchavi period by the ruler Jisnu Gupta named Buddha- Buddha-Nilkantha (locally called Buddhanilkantha) (Ojha, 2016), also known as the *Narayansthan* Temple, is located below the Shivapuri Hill at the northern end of the Kathmandu valley, in Buddhanilkantha Municipality. Lord Vishnu is honored at this temple. The main sculpture of sleeping Vishnu at the temple is the biggest stone sculpture of the Licchavi era. If we look closely at the statue of sleeping Vishnu, we may see Buddha's forehead in the Vishnu sculpture. As a result, it is seen as a merger of Hinduism and Buddhism in a single figure known as *Buddha-Buddhanilkantha* (Ojha, 2016). If we look at the outside of the temple, Lord Vishnu is in a sleeping pose in Shesh Saiya, but if we look closely, we can see the forehead of Buddha in the Vishnu sculpture (Tamang, 2022).

The Bhairav is another prominent Shiva form in Nepal. Different elements of Bhairav play significant significance in Kathmandu Valley celebrations. Bhairav is

primarily revered as the valley's defender and Shiva's wrathful avatar. Hindus all around the world worship Shiva as a vegetarian God, however in Kathmandu, both Hindus and Buddhists worship Lord Shiva as a non-vegetarian God under the name Bhairab (Ojha, 2016).

According to Hindu belief, Lord Vishnu will incarnate on Earth 10 times, each time as a new incarnation or avatar. He has appeared as Matsya (a fish), Kurma (a tortoise), Varaha (a wild boar), Narasimha, Vamana (a Brahmin), Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki (who will appear at the end of the Kali Yuga). His animal incarnations are fish, tortoise, and wild boar, and Hindus revere those creatures as Lord Vishnu's incarnations. All Hindus and those who believe in rebirth, pre-birth, and Moksha or Mukti (Nirvana) thought that visiting a temple eased all sufferings and sorrows (Mukti=Nirvana, Nath=God). This temple is a symbol of Hindu-Buddhist religious coexistence (Khatiwada & Dahal, 2010). The temple's priest is Hindu, and the temple's caretakers are Buddhists known as Jhumas. Mukti Nath is worshipped as an avatar of Vishnu by Hindus, whereas Guru Rim poche is worshipped by Buddhists (Ojha, 2016).

The well-known Bhimeshwor temple may be found in the Dolakha Bazar of the Dolakha district. The primary statue at this temple is of the deity Bhim, also known as Bhimsen or Bhimeshwor. Bhim is regarded as the second Prince of Pancha Pandav and is particularly revered as the will god of merchants. The idol of Bhim Sen is a rough stone triangle formed in Dolakha under the roofless temple. This idol is known as Bhim Sen, although it has three reincarnations: Bhim Sen, Goddess Bhagwati, and God Shiva. Animals were slaughtered at this temple for Goddess Bhagwati, but no blood was sacrificed to Lord Shiva. However, three Gods are worshipped differently at this temple three times a day (Bajracharya, 2022).

Palanchwok Bhagwati temple in Kavre district is one of the most well-known goddess shrines among Buddhists and Hindus. Both faiths worship the same Goddess, the Hindu Goddess Durga and the Buddhist Goddess Tara (Ojha, 2016).

Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautama Buddha and a World Heritage site, is an important pilgrimage site for Buddhists. Swayambhu Nath (the Monkey Temple) and Bouddhanath are two more important Buddhist sites in Kathmandu. Similarly, Namo buddha of Kavre and Vajra yogini of Sankhu are well-known Buddhist pilgrimage sites. In Nepal, Buddhism is practiced in a variety of ways. Theravada Buddhism is practiced by the local Newar's, particularly the Maharajan's, Dongols, and the Jyapu



group (Bajracharya, 2022). Vajrayana Buddhism is practiced by the Shakya, Bajracharya, and Manandhar communities, whilst Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism are practiced by the Tamang and Sherpas. Within Tibetan Buddhism, there are also Sakyapa, Nigmapa, Kagyupa, and Geluk sects (Ojha, 2016). Acharya Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rimopche in Tibetan, is regarded as the founder of Tibetan Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautam, who was born in 534 B.C. at Lumbini in the southern Terai, was the Hindu Prince (Khatiwada & Dahal, 2010). These Buddhist temples are also significant to Hindus. Hindus pray to Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu in these temples, while Buddhists pray to Lord Buddha in the same temple. There are several additional sculptures in and around Kathmandu that are historically significant as well as the best instances of Hindu-Buddhist religious harmony. Many Hindus visit Lumbini, Buddha, and Swayambhu Nath to worship to Buddha as an incarnation of God Vishnu, while Buddhists visit Pashupati and other temples to pray to Buddha.

What one observes in Nepal goes beyond religious tolerance; it may be referred to as religious acceptance among the many communities. People from many ethnic and religious origins worship certain common deities in addition to their clan or family deities. Each religion values and respects the culture and traditions of the other. Many Hindus visit Buddhist Shrines regularly, believing Buddha to be an incarnation of Vishnu and celebrating their celebrations as Hindu festivals. Temples, paintings, and even sculptures have portrayed religious harmony.

### **Religious Harmony between Hindu- Buddhist religious groups in Nepal**

Buddhism, along with other minor religions, existed in ancient Nepal. Hindus surround them in almost every location where they dwell. It has a stronger influence on culture and belief systems. Buddhists and Hindus disagree theologically. However, Buddha is revered in Hindu society as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, and Buddhism as a component of Hindu religion, as seen by Nepalese art and architecture, as well as temple sculptures. Hindus or Buddhists, followers respect one another in terms of faith (Tamang, 2022).

Most Hindu worshippers visit Buddhist shrines and Buddhists do the same. Other religious people are not permitted to worship at Hindu temples except the Buddhists. Normally, Buddhists are opposed to animal sacrifices, which Hindus do, however, in Kathmandu Valley, Buddhists perform animal sacrifices as well as offer wine and non-veg goods at temples (Lama, 2022). Ganesh is the most visible example of religious harmony in Nepal between Hindu and Buddhist religious groups. Hindus

worship Ganesh as a vegetarian God and bring him sweets, although Kathmandu's Buddhists (the Newar) offer wine and non-veg meals and perform sacrifices in the same temple where the priests are Brahmins. On the same row, Hindus serve sweets and Buddhists serve alcoholic beverages and non-vegetarian meals, as well as perform sacrifices. They are both at ease when worshipping Ganesh (Bajracharya, 2022).

### **Causes behind religious Syncretic**

The causes behind religious syncretic are as follows:

#### ***Social acceptance***

The Hindu majority recognized Buddhism as a component of the Hindu religion, while Buddhists, despite their doctrinal differences with Hindus, regarded Buddhism as an integral element of society. People from many ethnic and religious origins worship certain common deities in addition to their clan or family deities. Each religion values and respects the culture and traditions of the other. Many Hindus visit Buddhist Shrines regularly, believing Buddha to be an incarnation of Vishnu and celebrating their celebrations as Hindu festivals. All-important religious festivals of various religious groups are awarded holidays (Ojha, 2016). Temples, paintings, and even sculptures have portrayed religious syncretism.

#### ***Mutual Respect***

Buddhists were honored by the monarchs and given high-ranking positions in the palace during the Monarchical period, whether it was ancient, medieval, or modern Nepal. There was a Buddhist chief secretary to the Hindu King from the Bajracharya family. Buddhists were offered high-level posts in all aspects of society, not only the palace. Buddhists assist society in many capacities as political leaders, public workers, medical professionals, engineers, and university professors (Bajracharya, 2022).

#### ***Co-operation***

The notion of cooperation is critical in developing positive relationships amongst religious groups. They will appreciate and tolerate various religions if this aspect is present in their lives. Cooperation may be demonstrated in their actions, such as honoring religious festivities, customs, and beliefs in their society (Lama, 2022). Both Hindus and Buddhists celebrate Buddha Purnima, Dashain and other festivals as their holiday.

### ***Constitutional Rights***

The Nepalese constitution grants Buddhists equal rights without discrimination for their status as a minority (Timilsina & Shrestha, 2072 B.S.). From the outset, Buddhists have had equal rights to their Hindu counterparts in areas such as civil rights, political rights, freedom of expression, and property rights (Timilsina & Shrestha, 2015). Buddhists have even occupied positions of power. The proportion is not disheartening. Many renowned Buddhists are parliamentarians, ministers, higher-ranking public servants, academics, attorneys, scientists, medical practitioners, engineers, and so on. They have both contributed to the development of the country.

### **Conclusion**

It is critical to recognize that living in a peaceful community free of conflict and tension is important for national progress. Nobody in this world wants to live in a state of tension, conflict, or war. Thus, to establish a peaceful community, religious groups must develop their unity and solidarity. Inter-religious peace should be established on mutual trust and respect among diverse faith groups. What one observes in Nepal goes beyond religious tolerance; it may be referred to as religious acceptance among the many communities. Religion is one of the pillars of national integration and social stability. People from many ethnic and religious origins worship certain common deities in addition to their clan or family deities. Each religion in Nepal respects and loves the culture and traditions of the other, as can be seen in Nepalese sculptures. The Nepali sculptures are a symbol of Hindu-Buddhist religious harmony in Nepal.

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