

4. Minority Education | A study of Indian Muslims

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Abstract

It is a universally accepted fact that education is the most potent and effective tool to achieve empowerment of any section of society. Muslims in India lag behind in education is a sad aspect of their life. It is a matter of common beliefs that unless Muslim educational backwardness is addressed, the empowerment of Indian Muslims would remain elusive. The Muslims in India would remain politically marginalized and economically poor unless they overcome their educational backwardness. Education holds the key to the empowerment of Indian Muslims. Education is one of the most powerful factors for the political, social, economic and spiritual development of individuals and communities. It is a well known fact that India cannot march on the path of development and claim to be world leader if majority of its minority community remains educationally backward. High dropout rates among Muslim students are worrisome. As with many Indians, the main reason for educational backwardness of Muslims is abject poverty due to which children are forced to drop out after the first few classes.

Keywords

Empowerment; Development; Backwardness; Discrimination

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The Muslims of India are the major religious minority within India and one of the largest Muslim communities in the world. However, they are a relatively small group, comprising only 13% to 14% of the population in an overwhelmingly Hindu society.

It is a universally accepted fact that education is the most potent and effective tool to achieve empowerment of any section of society. Although it is true that economic well-being also makes a significant contribution in this regard, yet the nature of positive change brought about by education ensures a position of dignity for the individual and the community which instils a sense of confidence and self-worth. Elevation of social and economic status is usually natural outcomes of good education.

At the time of adopting the Constitution the Indian state had committed itself to provide elementary education under Article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 45 state that "The State shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years," In 1993, in a landmark judgement, the Supreme Court ruled that the right to education is a fundamental right flowing from the Right to Life in Article 21 of the Constitution. Subsequently in 2002 education as a fundamental right was endorsed through the 86th amendment to the Constitution. Article 21-A states that "*The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age six to fourteen years in such a way as the state may, by law, determine.*" The 86th Amendment also modified Article 45 which now reads as "The state shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of 6 years."

However, despite the commitment the number of children in this age group who have remained out of school is alarmingly large.

Muslims in India lag behind in education is a sad commentary on a community whose holy book Quran is derived from the word meaning reading. The very first verse of the Quran '*Iqra/bi-ismi rabbika allatheh khalaqa.....*' is an exertion to read. Our Holy Prophet (S.A.W.), said, *Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.* And: *Seek, knowledge even if it is to be found in a place as distant as China.* It is a matter of utter surprise and shock that despite great emphasis of Islam on seeking Ilm (knowledge) why its followers in secular India lag behind. The various commissions appointed by the Government of India and independent researchers have repeatedly confirmed the poor plight of Muslim education in India. The situation has become so depressing that if urgent remedial measures are not undertaken, the things would slip out of hand. It is a matter of common beliefs that unless Muslim educational backwardness is addressed, the empowerment of Indian Muslims would remain elusive. The Muslims in India would remain politically marginalized and economically poor unless they overcome their educational backwardness. Education holds the key to the empowerment of

Indian Muslims. Education is one of the most powerful factors for the political, social, economic or spiritual development of individuals and communities. It helps individuals to acquire the confidence and capability to match the levels of those who are in the mainstream in society. The founder of this great seat of learning Sir Syed had realised that education was the only remedy for the ills afflicting the Indian Muslims. He regarded modern education as the only means by which the Muslims could be extricated from the quagmire of stagnation and set on the path of progress.

It is a well known fact that India cannot march on the path of development and claim to be world leader if majority of its minority community remain educationally backward. If this trend is not arrested it will have the adverse effect pulling down the general growth of the country. It is well stated that if the house of my neighbour is burning, my house cannot remain protected for a long period. One day the flame of my neighbour will engulf my house as well. This is to simply lay emphasis on the fact that the task of empowerment of Indian Muslims should be our national concern and priority. This is also not to underplay the fact that it is the Muslim community that has to ultimately alarm the nation about their plight and take initiative so that others can join them in their task of saving the community from complete debacle. There cannot be two opinions on the fact that the government must come out with a comprehensive plan to improve the educational condition of Muslims. But at the same time it is also equally necessary for Muslims to shave their own responsibility in coming out of the quagmire and empower themselves educationally. It is only through the joint efforts of State and Muslim community that we can achieve the goal of taking the community out from the darkness of the educational backwardness.

As mentioned earlier, education is an area of grave concern for the Muslim Community. The popular perception that religious conservatism among Muslims is a major factor for not accessing education is incorrect. The recognition of their educational backwardness is quite acute amongst a large section of Indian Muslims and they wish to rectify it urgently. There is a significant internal debate about how this should be done. Private minority institutions and Madarsas are seen as the only option available to the community for improving the educational status of Muslims Community. However, others find these to be questionable alternative pursued by the state neglecting its own responsibility. Relying predominantly on Madarsa and denominational institutions for improving the educational states of Muslims was also seen by some as violating the spirit of the Constitution.

High dropout rates among Muslim students are worrisome. As with many Indians, the main reason for educational backwardness of Muslims is abject poverty due to which children are forced to drop out after the first few classes. This is particularly true for Muslim girls. Little children are expected to provide for their families by working in Karkhanas (small workshops), as domestic help or by looking after their siblings while their mothers go to work. It was felt that the incidence of child labour was much higher among Muslim as compared to other Socio-Religious Communities. Poor and illiterate parents cannot afford tuition for their children; nor can they provide the necessary support



system at home which has become so essential a part of today's educational system. The opportunity costs involved in sending children to school is also too high, making it difficult for parents to do so.

Moreover, a community specific factor for low educational achievement is that Muslims do not see education as necessarily translating into formal employment. The low representation of Muslims in public or private sector employment and the perception of discrimination in securing salaried jobs make attach less importance to formal 'secular' education in comparison to other Socio-Religious Communities. At the same time the Community, especially the educated Muslim middle class, finds itself frustrated and alienated because of the lack of presence and opportunities in administrative, policy and political spaces.

We may complain that only a few good quality schools, especially Government schools, are found in Muslim areas. The teacher-pupil ratio is also high in these schools. This forces Muslim children to go to private schools, if they can afford to, or else to drop out. Schools beyond the primary level are few in Muslim localities. Exclusive girls' schools are fewer, and are usually at a distance from Muslim localities. This has its repercussions because after any incident of communal violence parents pull out their girls from school fearing their security. Lack of hostel facilities is another limiting factor, especially for girls. This problem gets compounded by the fact that people are unwilling to give rooms on rent to Muslim students. In any case, spending on separate residential facilities, in the absence of hostels, is a great financial burden on Muslim families as rents for accommodation are very high.

Government schools that do exist in Muslim neighbourhoods are merely centres of low quality education for the poor and marginalized. The poor quality of teaching, learning, absentee teachers, in turn, necessitate high cost inputs like private tuitions, particularly in the case of first generation learners from the Muslim community. This has a negative impact on retention and school completion. Thus, poverty again has a causal link with access to education among Muslims. The 'communal' content of school text books, as well as, the school ethos has been a major cause for concern for Muslims in some states. This is a disconcerting for the school going Muslim child who finds a complete absence of any representation of her community in the school text. Moreover, many schools are culturally hostile and Muslim students experience an atmosphere of marginalization and discrimination.

Subtle deterrents to school admissions have already been mentioned. A growing communal mindset among large number of school teachers adds to the 'hostile' school atmosphere. The distrust levels can be gauged from the fact that people actually believe that schools in some states have been given instructions not to let Muslim students pass in examinations. It is also alleged that it is not easy for Muslims to get jobs as teachers. Besides, Muslim teachers are often treated badly. The transfer of Muslim teachers to schools at a great distance is not uncommon. Discriminatory stoppage of salaries of Muslim teachers has also been alleged. It has been reported that in some locations, Hindu parents refuse to let their children go to schools where there are Muslim teachers.

Madarsas, through which the Community ensures that its future generations acquire knowledge of Islam, have become a symbol of Muslim identity in India. Often they are looked upon with suspicion by the wider society, despite the fact that they are involved in providing religious education to the Muslim Community, Labelling of Madarsas as a den for terrorists is extremely worrisome for the Muslim Community. Even though there has been no evidence to suggest that Madarsas are producing terrorists, they are constantly under scrutiny.

Many a time Madarsas are the only educational option available to Muslim children, especially in areas where no schools have reached the Muslim masses. Very often children go to Madarsas not out of choice but due to non-availability and inaccessibility of other schools, and a near absence of education in their mother tongue.

A wide variety of problems associated with the education of Muslim women were raised. These problems result in low enrolment and retention. In the dismal scenario there is one big ray of hope; while the education system appears to have given up on Muslim girls, the girls themselves have not given up on education. There is a strong desire and enthusiasm for education among Muslim women and girls across the board.

The Sachar Committee findings are a shocking testimony to six decades of institutional neglect and bias that has left the country's Muslims far behind other Socio-Religious Communities in the area of education, employment, access to credit, access to social and physical infrastructure and political representation. Some of the important and revealing findings of the Sachar Committee in the education fields are as follow -

1. The literacy rate for Muslims (59%) is far below the national average (65%). When compared to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes the growth in literacy for Muslims was lower than the former.
2. As many as 25 percent of Muslim children in the 6-14 years age group have either never attended schools or else dropped out at some stage.
3. Dropout rate among Muslims is the highest at the level of Primary, Middle and High Secondary compared to all the Socio-Religious Communities. Only 17 percent Muslims above the age of 17 years have completed matriculation as compared to 26 percent for all Socio-Religious Communities.
4. The disparity in Graduate Attainment Rates between Muslims and other categories has been widening since the 1970s in urban and rural areas. The percentage of graduates in poor households pursuing post graduate studies is significantly lower for Muslims: Hindus General (29 percent); SCs/Sts (28 percent); OBCs (23 percent); Muslims (16 percent).
5. Only one out of 25 undergraduate students and one out of 50 post-graduate students in 'premier colleges' are Muslims.
6. Muslims are grossly underrepresented in the elite Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). Enrolment data for the years 2004-05 and 2005-

06 show Muslims were only 1.3 percent of the total number of students in all the IIM courses. In case of the IITs, out of 27,161 students enrolled in all the courses, only 894 (3.3%) were Muslims.

7. The unemployment rate among Muslim graduates is the highest among all Socio-Religious Categories, poor as well as non-poor.

After the findings of the Sachar Committee, now the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), a central government body, has reconfirmed that India's largest religious minority is the most backward community in the field of education.

Discussion and elevation on the existing schemes and programmes launched by the Government of India in the educational fields for Muslims is imperative for any future plan of action. It is true that after the deep slumber of several decades, the Government of India has finally awakened and of late recognised, albeit for political reasons, the need to promote education among Muslims who have fallen far behind the national average and even also behind the SCs, STs and OBC in some respects, in the field of education. The Government of India has thus initiated some schemes and programmes, though without bothering about their effective implementation, to ameliorate the situation. Some of the important schemes and programmes were first launched after the submission of the Gopal Singh Committee Report under the PM15-Point Programme issued in 1983 under the premiership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Under the 15-Point Programme two main initiatives were taken in the field of education for minorities: (1) organisation of coaching classes in minority education institutions to train students from minority in minority education institutions to train students from minority communities to complete successfully in the recruitment for various government jobs; (2) and setting up of ITIs and polytechnics in minority concentration areas.

Next forward leap in the direction of educational uplift of Muslims was the National Education Policy 1986 and its Action Programme. In 1992, the 1986 Action Programme was revised and certain new measures were envisaged. In 1989, the Maulana Azad Education Foundation (MAEF), was set up to promote education among educationally backward Muslims in general, and Muslim girl in particular. In pursuance of the revised Programme of Action (PoA) 1992, two new centrally-sponsored schemes were launched during 1993-94. These are, schemes of Area Intensive Programme for Educationally Backward Minorities; and scheme of Financial Assistance for Modernisation of Madarsas Education. Over a time, it has been felt that all these schemes need to be implemented in an integrated way so as to have wider coverage, greater thrust and visibility of minority education programme. In the Tenth Plan the aforesaid two schemes have been merged to form the Area Intensive and Madarsa Modernisation Programme.

The erstwhile Area Intensive and Madarsa Modernisation Programme (AIMMP) scheme has been revised as two distinct schemes with effect from November 2008 namely : (i) Scheme for Providing Quality Education in Madarsas (SPQEM); and (ii) Scheme for Infrastructure Development in Minority Institutions/Schools.

The Central Government has already initiated, as mentioned above, various useful programmes and schemes to improve the education conditions of Muslims of India. However, no satisfactory record on the implementation of the schemes and programme relating to educational uplift to Muslim minorities is available. Many of existing schemes and programmes need serious review and reinforcement. In addition to existing measures the Government of India may also undertake the following measures to further boost the ongoing efforts in this direction and to solve the problem of educational backwardness of Muslims more expeditiously.

1. Non-availability of reliable data, absence of serious analysis, absence of proper institutional mechanism for evaluation and monitoring of existing Muslim related governments schemes and submitting concrete proposals with sensitivity to the needs of the Muslims by the best of talent available on different aspects of Muslim status in India are some of the stumbling blocks in formulating concrete policies for muslim empowerment. Hence, it is imperative that an autonomous National Centre for the study of Muslims of India be established.
2. A National integration and Minority University with Medical, Engineering, Law and Management faculties in each state having Muslim population exceeding 10% should be established to fulfil the higher education needs of the Muslims and facilitate the Minority Educational Institution of the region to get affiliation.
3. The existing Area Intensive Programme needs to be reviewed and evaluated. There is merit in the argument that Muslim condition will not improve by opening more schools in minority concentrated districts or blocks but by opening schools for Muslims or reserving certain percentage of seats for them in the educational institutions opened in these areas.
4. The Madarsa education occupies pre-eminent position in the education delivery system to Muslims in India. Job-oriented education and vocational training should be introduced in these Madarsas to enable Muslims coming from lower middle classes consisting of artisans, etc., to find education in Madarsas even more relevant.
5. There should be adequate provision for the training of Urdu teachers as it is one of the serious problems faced by the Urdu medium schools.
6. Minority Career Counselling, Employment and Placement Cell in each Muslim Concentrated District should be established to facilitate and guide educated Muslim youths in selecting right career and to ensure placement for them through their concerted efforts.
7. Various coaching schemes of the Government of India do exist today, what is needed now is to implement them effectively.

8. The state of education among Muslim women is even the worst. The cultural traditions do not allow Muslim girls to take advantage of co-educational schools, especially if they are far away from their homes. The opening of separate girl schools, appointment of lady teachers, and opening of girls hostel are some important measures if implemented sincerely may give boost to Muslim female education.

A qualitative improvement in Muslim education is prerequisite to be preventing discrimination. It is now well established that education is the core and long term solution to address various facets of backwardness comprehensively. There is a need for creating a spirit of excellence among Muslims. Therefore, the focus of these efforts needs to be on quality. Efforts need to aim to producing future leaders from amongst Muslims in varied walks of life.

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