

Indian Muslim Women and Education- Status, Issues and Remedies

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Abstract

Considering Indian situation, women in India enjoy special status. Post Independent India made several attempts to raise level of education in general and for the women in particular as it was considered to be instrumental to bring overall development, i.e. social, economic, cultural and political development, of the society. Many commissions and committees were set up to improve the status of women education during Post Independence in India. Many positive steps were taken by the state to enhance the participation of women at all levels of education. Constitutional provisions also guaranteed the education of women and made special provisions for the state to take appropriate and affirmative action for their education. However it seems that the muslim women in India have not taken full advantage of the benefits of such schemes and provisions. Muslims in India are the largest minority comprising 14% of the total population of the country and the literacy rate of muslims is the lowest among all the religious groups and the literacy rate of muslim women is lower than their counterparts and the worse among all the women groups in the country. In almost all fields of education the condition of muslim women is deplorable and is a subject of grave concern for the parents, muslim intellectuals, educationists and the policy makers as the development of the nation may not be achieved ignoring education of such large section of the society. Hence, the present paper will examine the issues involved in muslim women education, approach of the state and the religious intellect and the role of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). The paper will also suggest the measures to overcome such a plight so that the women may shoulder educational, economic and political responsibilities with their counterparts in an equal manner.

Key Words: Muslim Women Education, Literacy Rate, Minority Communities

Although education in general is important but women education is all the more important, not only because the women constitutes half the population but also due to its far reaching effects on the society at large. Pt. Jawaharlal Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India once said that if a man is educated an individual is educated but if a woman is educated entire family gets educated. Researches have shown that educated girls become more effective mothers (Datta 2009). "Education liberates women from ignorance, increases self-esteem and helps them take control over their lives and guide the progress of their families. (Husain, Khan and Khan 2018)".

Many commissions and committees were set up to improve the status of women education in India. Considering Indian situation, women in India enjoy special status. Almost all policies and schemes have made special provisions for women education. At the time of framing the constitution Article 45 made provision under Directive Principles of State Policy that the state shall endeavor to provide free and compulsory education to children until they complete the age of 14 years, which include girls also. Consequent upon that huge financial allocations were made to fulfill the target. Article 15(3) made special provision for the state to take appropriate and affirmative action for women education. Article 42 provides that the state shall make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. The first commission appointed on education was The University Education Commission (1948-49) under the chairmanship of Prof. Radha Krishnan, and its report has a complete chapter on women's education. The report says "the mother who is enquiring and alert....., will be the best teacher in the world..." The commission recommended that there should be educational guidance, by qualified men and women, to help the women to understand their real educational interest. Setting up of The National Committee on Women's Education under the chairmanship of Durga Bai Deshmukh is considered to be a land mark for women's education. The committee very categorically laid emphasis that highest priority be given to schemes prepared for this purpose to reduce the gap between men and women education and separate funds be created for that. It also recommended that a National Council for the Education of Girls and Women be made. Another milestone in women's education was 'Hansa Mehta Committee' (1962-64), which suggested co-education in general at the elementary stage however also mentioned to make separate primary and middle schools wherever necessary. It also recommended special facilities for girls and curriculum at different levels. It also recommended to adopt co-education up to elementary stage and even to appoint women teachers in boys' school also to encourage girls to join such schools. National Education Commission (1964-66) was appointed under the chairmanship of Dr. D.S. Kothari which considered to be the most important initiative and a great landmark in the history of education after Independence. It forcefully recommended education of women a major programme and reiterated state and centre to set up separate machinery to take care of girls' education. It recommended special schemes be made to improve women education and funds be made available on priority basis to implement such schemes. The commission also stressed to start part time vocational courses for women and make necessary arrangements for their training and employment. The National Policy on Education 1986 was the milestone in the field of education which gave recommendations of far reaching consequences. The policy stated to ensure equal access to education for women and girls and special measures be adopted to eradicate illiteracy and create gender sensitive educational system and increasing the enrolment and retention of girls to eliminate discrimination of any kind. The policy emphasized the participation of women in vocational and technical professions and a policy of non- discrimination be followed to discard stereotyping in such programmes to encourage women participation in unconventional occupations. It also suggested the appointment of at least one female teacher in primary school under Operation Blackboard. The policy laid emphasis on equal access of women and girls to reduce the gender gap in secondary and higher education also. Targets should be set to achieve the outcome of the schemes particularly related to weaker sections including SCs/ STs/ OBCs and minorities. It also

reiterated to promote Women's studies as a part of various courses. Scheme of Universalisation of Elementary Education also emphasized to reduce gender gap at primary and elementary stage within definite period of time. Through RTE Act 2009, the government guaranteed free and compulsory education of the children in the age group of 6-14 years and act made elementary education a fundamental right for the children including girls in the relevant age group.

However, inspite of the various constitutional provisions for the education of women and girls, muslim women are far behind in all stages of education in comparison to the muslim males as well as other religious groups in the country.

Islam does not debar women from education. When Allah said 'Read....', it equally applies to men and women. There is a saying of Prophet Mohammad (BPUH) 'acquisition of knowledge is incumbent upon all the faithful men and women'. However the boundaries drawn by the fundamentalists have created a situation that the uneducated families and parents have drawn a line for their female children not to cross certain limits. Masses of the muslim families in India confine their women to stop their studies after Quran and most of these women study (recite) Quran even without understanding its meaning which hardly broadens their vision, approach and attitude towards Islam and the world. Disconcerting consequence of this is that they can not use the great Knowledge of Quran and Islam in nurturing their children in particular and the neighbouring society in general as well as their own development

The women who have entered the schools and universities have always been a soft target of criticism by the so called Ulemas (learned religious people). Even these women are not welcomed by a large liberal section of the society in that they are considered to be the persons to look after their children and families within the boundaries of their homes.

So much so these women are exploited in the educational institutions variedly viz; economically, socially and sexually. These women in turn, although may be academically intelligent, generally do not deliver according to their intellectual capacity, as they most of the time have to protect themselves from the internal and external threats. However, some of the women who get an opportunity, do excel in different walks of life. Violence against women in one form or the other is also one of the most significant reasons of lesser visibility of women in the schools, universities and offices.

Even the state does not seem to be very encouraging in its true letter and spirit to promote women education. This is evident from the fact that various weaker sections of the society such as scheduled caste, scheduled tribes, disabled persons and backward communities in India have been provided reservation in education as well as in the employment, but women have not been considered for such a reservation for any purpose. Therefore, the participation of women in almost all walks of life is very disheartening. The situation is same although among all the religious communities but status of muslim women seems to be more discouraging. Muslims are largest minority in India and constitute approximately 14% of the

total population. The real progress of the nation i.e. economic, social or political may not be possible ignoring educational development of the muslim women which roughly account for 7%.

One of the most important fact that prevails is that muslim community is the most backward among all the religious communities of India (Sachar Committee Report 2006). They are not aware of the importance of education in general and the education of muslim girls.

“Parents of muslim girls in general are illiterate and ignorant about importance of education of their girl child. (Fidaus Bano 2017)”. Along with the fact that the Muslims are financially and educationally as backward as has been stated by the sachar committee report, the fact has been corroborated by Radhika Kapoor (2019) stating that “the muslims are residing in the conditions of poverty and backwardness. They have severe financial problems due to which they are not able to afford education for their children”. Bano indicates educational status of muslim women in India is worse as compared to muslim men, and women of other communities. They have the lowest work participation rate and most of them engage in the self-employment activities. This goes without saying that in the early stage the girls are sent to nearby located maktabas and madrasahs and in general it becomes terminal stage of education for most of the muslim girls. Even if the parents want them to send to the schools, they are not available in the nearby locality. The fact has been reported by Firdaus Bano (2017) in her research saying that “schools are not available within walking distance and closer to the place of dwelling and that is why the parents are a bit reluctant due to the feeling of insecurity”. Poor financial condition, however is the dominant factor which is a great hurdle for the girls’ education. Zeb (2019) points out that “the financial burden is one of the main factors that affect the continuation of female education”. It is true that poor economic condition is mainly responsible for the low status of girls’ education, parents’ apathy and their negative attitude is also one of the biggest barrier to women education. The fact has been reported by Zeb (2019) in her research findings “it has also been observed that there is a negative attitude towards girl’s education among Muslims”. There are several instances where it has been found that in general muslim parents prefer madrasah for the education of their daughters”.

The author has gone through a vast literature on women education but is unable to find a concrete and practical suggestion(s) to over the plight of women education. Hence, the present paper will make an attempt to highlight the status of muslim women education in India. The author will also analyse the causes of low participation of Muslim women at various stage of education and employment. The author will offer certain suggestions to bring reforms in women education for muslims.

Literacy among various minority communities

Table 1: Literacy Rate among Minority Communities: 2011 (In % age)

Communities	Male	Female	Average
Muslims	62.4	51.9	57.155
Hindus	70.78	55.9	63.38
Sikhs	71.32	63.29	67.305
Christians	76.78	71.97	74.375
Jains	87.86	84.93	86.395
Buddhists	77.87	65.6	71.735
Others	59.38	41.38	50.38

This is the most unfortunate state of affairs that the literacy rate of muslim women is not only lower than the muslim males but also among the women of other communities in India. The above table highlights the literacy rate of minority groups along with their male counterparts. The data indicate that male members from Jain, Buddhist and Christian communities are doing fairly well in literacy, while muslim males are lagging behind and are much below the National average i.e. 74.13%. If we critically analyse the above figures, we find that the muslim women, are not only much below than their Muslim counter parts, but their literacy rate is worse among all other communities. This is very unfortunate that a large population of muslim female i.e. approximately 48% is totally illiterate and it seems that apart from many reasons, religious orthodoxy and cultural ethos of muslims lead them to believe that modern education is a threat to Islamic values. Moreover, “the traditional Islamic injunction restricting girls to go in for education in public place or institutions-especially higher coeducation institutions still seem to guide the minds of most of the muslim parents (Ruhela 1998)”. So “there is little doubt that muslim women are among the most underprivileged, least literate, most indigent and politically marginalized sections of Indian society (Ali 2014)”.

This state of affairs does not match with Article 53 (3), which made a special provision enabling the state to make affirmative discrimination in favor of women. The issue is serious particularly for muslim women which needs to be taken care of by the government as well as the community itself. It is obvious that the national development is linked with the growth of all the sections of the society and muslim women also constitute a sizable proportion of population of the country. It is also very important that educated women may not only be a good citizen but also a good mother. On the other hand, women are most vulnerable to trafficking when they are under educated and poor, says the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP). While approximate 48% muslim women are totally illiterate, the safety of girls are at the stake which is matter of grave concern.

Table 2: Never Enrolled in Education (Age 3~35 years) 2017~2018 (In %age)

Gender	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe	Muslims
Males	15	13	17
Females	22	20	22

Source: NSS 75th round

In general, even as the problems of women are many and common to most of them, it is Muslim women who are the worst sufferers in our society (Goswamee & Barbhuyan, 2015).

The above table (2) depicts the status of the male and female of marginalized communities who have never been enrolled. The muslim male percentage is the highest among those who have never been enrolled. The condition of other marginalized group is however better than muslim males where the table shows that 15% scheduled caste and 13% scheduled tribe were never enrolled. The status of muslim women is worst in this dimension where the data reveal that 22% muslim women in the age group of 3—35 years were never enrolled. This seems to be the clear cut violation of United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against women which off course includes muslim women. The National Policy on Education (1986) also recommended to empower women through education in the section ‘Education for Women’s Equality’ (Misra 2011). The policy clearly states that education will be used as agent of social change in bringing about an improvement in the status of girls and women education. If the figures of the above table are critically analysed it is revealed that even the powerful scheme of Universalization of Elementary Education which determined to bring everyone in school has not yielded fruitful results. The schemes of Adult and Continuing education and Education for All have also not attracted the adult muslim women towards educational programmes.

Work Participation among minority communities

Table 3: Work Participation among Minority communities 2011(In %age)

Communities	Male	Female	Total
Muslims	49.5	14.8	32.5
Sikhs	55.4	15.2	36.3
Christians	52.9	31.2	41.9
Jains	57.7	12.3	35.5
Buddhists	53.4	32.5	43.1

Source: Calculated from Census of India, Religion table 2011

Muslim women participation rate (WPR) among all the communities is very low (Dutta 2016). The above table describes the status of work participation of females of muslim community along with other minority groups in India. Census defines the work participation as the percentage of total workers including main and marginal workers to the total participation. Census also defines “main workers as those who work for at least 6 months and the marginal workers as those who work for less than 6 months in a year (Sukhpreet Singh 2017)”. Work participation is an important indicator of the economic condition of any community. It includes part time workers, family business or any economic activity. The

above table is the indicator of work participation of males and females among all the minority groups in the country. Table indicates that muslim females have the low work participation in comparison to muslim female and gap is too large which is 50% lesser than their total participation itself. More alarming is that there is almost negligible improvement of merely .7% in 10 years comparing it with the same in the year 2001 (Calculated from Census 2001). Moreover it is disheartening to note that their work participation is not only lower than the females of other communities but much lower than the national average of work participation among females in 2011. This is most unfortunate state of affairs related to work participation of women in general and muslims in particular while National Policy on Education 1986 laid great emphasis on the women employment.

Causes of Low performance of Muslim Women in Education

Since Independence many research studies and surveys have been conducted and some of the popular findings have listed the following many causes of low status of education and the work participation of Muslim women in India are as follows:

- Poor economic condition of muslim parents
- Lack of awareness of parents about modern education
- Girls not allowed to step out after the puberty
- Household responsibilities
- Traditional apathy
- Lack of dedicated leadership among muslims to guide and encourage girls
- School not available within walking distance
- Shortage of women teachers in school
- Lack of infrastructural facilities
- Curriculum not matching with the needs of muslim girls

The reasons of low status of muslim women as mentioned above have been the outcome of the researches conducted in past. Sachar committee (2006) has described Muslim community the most backward economically, socially, culturally and educationally and the muslim women are even more underprivileged in comparison to not only muslim males but among all religious communities in India.

As the majority of the muslim parents reside in the rural areas hence lack of muslim women enrolment in schools seems to be due to their engagement in the agricultural activities. This view point has been supported by Maddela and Pradeep M (2019) who point out that many parents, especially among the poor, do not send their daughters to school because their daughters are needed for agricultural and household production tasks as well as for domestic chores such as cooking and looking after younger siblings..

Suggestions

The above principal causes of low performance of muslim girls/ women in the field of education can be divided into two broader categories. First, those which relate to the

individual girls /women of muslim community and secondly those which relate to the education providing agencies including constitutional provisions.

The author after having presented the status of women education and her own view point regarding the reasons of their low status of education is of the firm opinion that apart from many causes of backwardness of muslim women, the prime factor is lack of genuine and dedicated leadership. The reason of lack of awareness of parents towards the importance of education though is also an important reason for the poor educational status but is also due to either no or little guidance available to the parents. There are many constitutional provisions to support educational efforts for the women along with plenty of philanthropic schemes which may cover the financial burden of the parents but the question as to how to take the advantages of those provisions and financial schemes still remain unanswered. The answer to avail such assistance is dedicated leadership which may guide from time to time to avail such schemes. Another important dimension is the motivation and encouragement which may also boost the morale of the girls. The community needs to strengthen its own capacity building efforts to develop leadership skills among the educated persons and create a team of leaders. This team may be entrusted the task of organizing orientation programmes for the muslim parents to guide and encourage the parents as well as the muslim girls to come forward to get enrolled in the schools. However, it has to be kept in mind while training people for leadership role an aptitude test of such persons is tested. These leaders may also orient those girls who are in the terminal stage of the schooling to go for various vocational and professional educational programmes. The group of leaders may also guide these girls to avail financial schemes offered by the government as well as philanthropic agencies. Here the role of the NGOs may not be ignored, in this endeavor, which should assume the responsibilities to create a team of leaders. The help of NGOs is also required to encourage women participation in private and public sector employment. Awareness programmes related to employment opportunities may also be organized along with their preparation for various such positions by NGOs.

Conclusion

Under RTE Act 2009, the state has the responsibility to provide free education and related infrastructure up to elementary level but everything may not be left to the government only. The community may seek the help of philanthropic groups for financial assistance. Moreover the muslim community leaders may negotiate on the issue of appropriateness of curriculum as well as the required infrastructure for the girls and also the availability of women teachers to ensure safety and security of the girls.

The role of NGOs is also very important who may also intervene in the curricular changes and its appropriateness from the point of view of muslim girls. NGOs may also fulfill necessary financial needs of the schools as well as of the muslim girls also. These NGOs need to organize orientation programmes for the parents inviting leaders created for this purpose. The NGOs and other social groups may also involve youths who may volunteer themselves in organizing awareness campaign on war footing basis. Some programmes to

motivate the girls to go for higher education particularly professional courses is also the need of the hour. The women's work participation in formal informal sectors also needs to be taken care of. The role of State is also very crucial at this point to make special provisions for education and employment for muslim women in India.

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