

The Status of Muslim Women in Higher Education in the Post-Sachar Scenario: Initiatives, Achievements and Challenges

Dr. Sayyada Begum

Assistant Professor

Department of English

S.D.D. K.K. College,

Chingrawathi, Bulandshahr (U.P.)

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Abstract

The government must provide a platform for equitable a participation and inclusive growth. First of all, creating sufficient awareness about various existing facilities, schemes and programmes is very important. Affirmative action to address the serious issue needs to be undertaken. Considering the gravity of the situation, a Constitution amendment may become necessary to provide justice to the religious minorities who are suffering because of the constitutional discrimination against them. Muslims being as backward as SCs/ STs are not getting the benefits of reservation simply because of their religious identity. The present paper The Status of Muslim Women in Higher Education in the Post-Sachar Scenario: Initiatives, Achievements and Challenges argues that this issue needs to be given due consideration so that reservation can be extended to Muslims like any other community.

Keywords: Discrimination, Community, Reservation, Empowerment, Development

Muslim women in India are disadvantaged thrice over: as members of a minority community, as women, and as poor women. Gender discrimination coalesces with class inequalities to perpetuate their structured disempowerment. Moreover, stereotypes of Muslim women abound. In popular perception, these women are typically seen as a monolithic entity undistinguished and indistinguishable in their homogeneity. The spotlight, when it falls on them, tends to do no more than view the role of religion in their lives and reinforce the usual stereotypes: *pardah*, multiple marriages, triple *talaq*, and the male privilege of unilateral divorce and the bogey of personal law. The truth, however, is that like women from other

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communities, Muslim women too are differentiated across class, caste, community, and geographical location (including the great rural-urban divide). Despite these differences within their lot, when compared to women from other faiths in India, the majority of Muslim women are among the most disadvantaged, least literate, most economically impoverished and politically marginalized sections of Indian society.

A High Level Committee under the Chairmanship of Justice (Retired) Rajinder Sachar was constituted by the Prime Minister's Office for preparation of a comprehensive report on the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community of India. The Committee submitted its report on November 17, 2006, which was laid in the parliament on November 30, 2006 and subsequently 72 recommendations of the report were accepted and the list of follow-up action on recommendations was approved by the Cabinet on May 17, 2007. So it's been almost 9 years since Sachar Committee published its report, highlighting the deep and extensive deprivations Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular face on the range of counts, including higher education. It has been as many years since the Central Government announced a programme of interventions to ameliorate the condition of Minorities and Muslims. Latest educational and development data do not show any significant improvements in the conditions of young Muslim women in higher education. This is a serious failing. It is also true that data collection and systematic tracking and analysing of performance for Muslim women have been patchy at best. Given the limited scholarly attention on Muslim situation, we are not yet sure, in a sufficiently nuanced way, what works and what does not for Muslim women, nationally as well as in different regional settings. This is a significant gap, given how significant Muslim outcomes are for national policies of inclusive growth and political stability.

This paper is a review of 'The Status of Muslim Women in Higher Education in the Post-Sachar Scenario: Initiatives, Achievements and Challenges'. While analysing the varying understanding of the phenomenon, including its regional and local dimensions, this paper is a review of the performance of plans and programmes undertaken for the educational welfare of Muslim women, public policy on access to education, poverty and financial constraints faced by young Muslim women in pursuing higher education, and the role of Muslim managed higher educational institutions. Further, it seeks to map the terrain, so to speak, in an effort to identify gaps and suggest research questions to better understand the

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drivers and facilitators of the exclusion, and how educational challenges for Muslim women could be overcome.

The condition of Muslims in India is pitiable. As it has been documented by the Sachar Committee Report (SCR), Muslims are virtually lagging behind all other communities and a trend of relative deterioration is observed in almost all spheres of day-to-day life. Especially in the field of education, the situation is of grave concern.

While the overall literacy rate in India is above 65%, the Literacy rate of Muslims is around 59%. However, on extending the consideration beyond mere literacy rate, Muslims fall far behind others. Where, in general, 26% of those aged 17 years and above have completed matriculation, this percentage is only 17% amongst Muslims. The Mean Years of Schooling among children of age group of 7- 16 years is lowest among Muslims at around 3.4 years whereas for others it is above 5 years. According to the 2001 Census data, while only about 7 per cent of the overall population aged 20 years and above are graduates or hold diplomas, this proportion is less than 4 per cent amongst Muslims. Besides, those having technical education at the appropriate ages (18 years and above) are as low as one per cent and amongst Muslims, that is almost non-existent.

With this backdrop, the situation of young Muslim women in higher education can be understood that it is pitiable. The Muslim Women's Survey (MWS), carried out in 12 states, spread over 40 districts in India, surveyed 9,541 Muslim and Hindu women respondents. Some significant findings of this survey regarding young Muslim women in classrooms were:

- The proportion of Muslim women in higher education is only 3.56 per cent. That's lower even than that of scheduled castes, which is 4.25 per cent.
- Urban location, which has a generally positive association with female education, has no great impact on Muslim women's educational attainment. This is a pointer to poverty as the foremost constraint on access to education, notwithstanding the noticeably greater educational opportunities in urban areas.
- Of the women who completed their studies, 26 per cent felt that they had to overcome obstacles in order to continue. On the whole, a slightly higher proportion of Muslim women than Hindu women reported that they faced obstacles in their schooling.
- A general devaluation of continuing education for girls is also linked to the desirability of early marriage, as indicated by the mean age of first marriage, which is a low 15.6; in the

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rural north it dips even further, to 15 years. Early marriage was cited as an important reason for dropping out of school.

The findings of other surveys are no different. For instance, according to the Sachar Report, "... it was argued that, contrary to popular perception that religious conservatism among Muslims somehow militates against educating girls, current research indicates that poverty and financial constraints are the major causes that prevent Muslim Girls from accessing modern/secular education." Other factors mentioned in the report include, "low perceived returns from education," "poor access to schools," and "low quality schools in Muslim-concentrated areas," among others.

Other factors, mentioned in other reports and surveys, regarding disadvantaged position of young Muslim women in higher education and employment, include providing schooling to girls requires the appointment of female teachers and the establishment of separate schools and other facilities, thus causing a great deal of hesitation in male-dominated society. The vast majority of Muslim women, irrespective of education levels, claimed to be unaware of any programmes directed towards women. The advantages of most government schemes, which over the years have specifically targeted women, have generally not accrued to them. According to MWS, 60 per cent of Muslim women are married by the age of 17. Early marriage hampers in improving their socio-economic status and educational achievement. Low socio-economic status and low levels of educational achievement are consistent with early marriage for girls; higher educational status generally makes for later marriages and women who have never married are definitely more likely to have a higher socio-economic status.

One way of achieving the goals of equity and empowerment for Muslim women would be to engage with the secular discourse of development and empowerment. Very rarely do mainstream policy makers acknowledge their poverty. That is why one thrust of state intervention has been to try to shift the balance within the identity of Muslim women, so that being a Muslim will take precedence over a host of other identities such as class or gender.

It was hoped that the scenario might change with time, and more particularly owing to the fact that 72 recommendations of the Sachar report were accepted and the list of follow-up action on recommendations was approved by the Cabinet; but unfortunately, the trend does

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not look very optimistic. What Sachar Committee Report (SCR) had found out has been reconfirmed by subsequent NSSO survey reports titled *Education in India: Participation and Expenditure*. One of the findings of the report is that Muslims still are the most backward section in terms of education. Percentage distribution of persons of age 5-29 years by current enrollment and attendance status in educational institutions for each religion shows that the Muslim community with an enrollment of 46.2% lags behind all other communities while Christians lead the trend with an enrollment of 58.3%. This might not give the actual state of affairs since it pertains to only the sample surveyed but it indeed shows the trend.

Indeed, the root cause of alarmingly low rate of young Muslim women begins at the primary level. At the primary level both boys and girls belonging to the Muslim community start with an above average enrollment but the rate falls quickly below average at the upper primary level and the trend continues up to the post higher secondary level. Although every community experiences a decline in the enrollment ratio as one goes up to the higher classes but the decline is the steepest in case of Muslims, more particularly Muslim girls. This means, the community loses its grip right at the primary level. The highest drop-out rate accounts for the steepest fall in enrollment at the next level i.e. the Upper Primary level and hence in the secondary and all subsequent levels. As stated earlier, the main concern with education among Muslims remains the low retention rate, causing high drop-out, and poor transition, as children progress through the school system. Muslim children constitute 16.6 per cent of total national enrolment in Grade I, but this declines to 8.4 per cent at Grade VIII. (Government of India, 2012:12), leading the SCR to conclude, ‘...transition to upper primary stage is one of the major bottlenecks in the education of Muslim children’. The other concern is that around girls’ education, with only a very minuscule proportion of Muslims girls having completed secondary and graduate education. According to HDR 2011, incidence of out of school children is associated with poverty. Financial constraints turn out to be the main barrier to continuation of education, forcing children into child labour – higher among Muslims (3 %) compared to the national average (2.4%). (Government of India, 2011: 229). Overall, the literacy problem among Muslims is worst in UP, Bihar and West Bengal.

The SCR explicitly recognizes that attainment of Muslims in school education is lower than average and the gap between Muslims and other communities increases as the level of education increases. Further, a comparison of the probability estimates for

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completion of higher secondary and graduation suggests that Muslims are at a much larger disadvantage at the higher secondary level. This presumably results in a much lower size of Muslim population eligible for higher education. These findings not only establish that there is little empowerment of Muslims but also discard even the misconception regarding minority appeasement.

The reasons for this alarming situation of the Muslim community's educational progress has been enumerated by the SCR as Poverty — considered as the Main Cause of Low levels of Education, Poor Access to Schools, Low Perceived Returns from Education, and other School-based Factors. While poverty among Muslims is explicit, the other factors deserve further elaboration. A mere physical existence of a school in the vicinity does not ensure access to quality education. As the report admits, Government schools that do exist in Muslim neighbourhoods are merely centers 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 tuition, 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 Muslim.

Poverty and education have a well established correlation. According to Census 2001, Muslims were the least literate among all religious communities. The recent NSSO 2007-08 survey, education round, further confirms a high proportion of Muslims as illiterates. This was at par with that of SCs/STs, and higher than for OBCs. Muslim women (47.3 per cent) make up amongst the most illiterate sections of society, comparable to SC/ST (53.2) women. A substantial proportion of Muslims—18 per cent male, and 15.4 per cent female – had attained only primary education. Meanwhile at higher, upper primary and above levels, Muslim proportion was significantly lower than that among all other groups including SCs. (Fazal, 2013: 6). Of course, the problem of poor education among Muslims is multifaceted. Less than half Muslim girls in age for primary and upper-primary level schools were enrolled. (Government of India, 2011:9) Among all religious communities, Muslims had the lowest Net Attendance Ratio (NAR) at all levels of education, in both rural and urban India. In fact, in rural India, low NAR among STs was comparable with that of the Muslims at the secondary and higher secondary levels. In urban India, NAR for Muslims was even lower than that for SCs and STs at all levels except at the higher secondary level, where they were

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similar. Data also reveals that it is at Upper Primary level (mostly in rural areas, but also urban) that the NAR for Muslims shows the biggest drop. And most seriously, incidence of ‘out of school’ children (of all social groups) was the highest among Muslims.

Low expectation of return from attending schools is another factor for lack of motivation towards education. Since the community does not see a lot of Muslims youths becoming successful by virtue of going to school, it apparently does not promise much of immediate return to people who rather pay attention to vocations that pay an earlier return. This happens due to abysmally low representation of Muslims in public and private sector jobs.

Another very important reason is the content of the school books which usually escapes the attention. The SCR points out that the “communal” content of school textbooks, as well as, the school ethos has been a major cause for concern for Muslims in some states. This is disconcerting for the school going Muslim child who finds a complete absence of any representation of her Community in the school text ultimately developing a sense of unbelongingness to the system.

One more, very crucial and most unfortunate, problem is that many schools are culturally hostile and Muslim students experience an atmosphere of marginalization and discrimination. A growing communal mindset among large number of school teachers adds to the ‘hostile’ school atmosphere. Furthermore, the report argues that, contrary to popular perception that religious conservatism among Muslims somehow militates against educating girls, current research indicates that poverty and financial constraints are the major causes that prevent Muslim girls from accessing ‘modern’/‘secular’ education.

The report reiterates that Muslim women often face overt discrimination from school authorities while trying to get admission or in availing of scholarships for their children. Perceptions of public security-partly associated with increasing incidents of communal violence-prevent parents from sending daughters to schools located at a distance where they would have to use public transport. This is particularly the case when they reach upper primary and middle school and leads to high dropout rates among Muslim girls in this age group. How unfortunate is that for a democracy like India? Is not it barbaric that someone grows in the society with anxiety and fear of communal violence? How can one expect such a generation to be good citizens with equal respect for all? Such developments, deliberate or

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inadvertent, not only question India's credentials as a secular democracy but also cast doubt over the future prospect of becoming one.

The report also points out that there are systematic discriminatory policies against Urdu –as a language. Since Urdu is no longer taught in most state schools some parents prefer not to send their daughters to schools instead they send them to Madarasas.

A special case of the Jawahar Navoday Vidyalayas (JNVs) is another eye opener. If poverty alone were responsible for low participation and attainment, the share of Muslims students in Navoday Vidyalayas should have been high but for some reasons this too, is extremely low at just about 3 to 4 %. The schools which were set up with “*the objective of excellence, coupled with equity and social justice*” also failed to draw participation of the largest religious minority. The big question being - why? Is it a failure of the Institutions to reach the community and address its needs and aspirations or is it a failure of the community to make use of the provision? What are the reasons for this failure?

One reason could be the lack of awareness and hence low level of interest. From a general understanding, the aforesaid factors like abject state of poverty – which restricts children to meet the eligibility requirement of the JNVs, low expectation from education, fear of being discriminated, poorly designed course content could provide some of the reasons. Further, is there any myth/misconception surrounding the schools about any religious or cultural affiliation that the community feels uncomfortable about just like the Tamils could not welcome the idea of JNVs because of compulsory Hindi? In order to have a better and a deeper understanding of the dynamics, there needs to be a detailed study.

Overall, the extent of Muslim exclusion then is all-round and deep-seated. ‘....the all India pattern that emerges is of a community steeped in poverty, having low educational attainment, bereft of land and other immovable assets, and largely dependent on self employment in low income activities.’ (Fazal & Kumar, 2012:195). What are the popular explanations for the poor outcomes?

Here our concern is only with education and that too of young Muslim women in higher education, where Muslims do particularly badly. The received wisdom, reflecting long-standing stereotypes about the community, has been that Muslims are not interested in modern education, rather they prefer to send their children to *madrasas*, and are particularly reluctant to send their girls out to schools. (Gayer & Jaffrelot, 2013:4). The Sachar report

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made the point that there is a great deal of evidence now to show that Muslims are as keen to send their children to schools as any other community, but that they are prevented from doing so for a variety of reasons. As to *madrasas*, the report showed that actually only a minuscule population of Muslims prefer *madrasas*, and that too as other avenues of education are not available close by. The report cites, for example, a recent study to make the point that economic circumstance of households has a major role to play in determining schooling outcome. It explains, school enrolment for different communities is significantly affected by the local level of development (e.g., availability of schools and other infrastructure) and the educational status of parents. (Government of India, 2006: 58).

The Sachar report demonstrates, using analysis of time trends that despite overall improvement in educational status, the rate of progress has been the slowest for Muslims. This has meant that the gap between Muslims and other groups has widened since Independence, and particularly since the 1980s. Sachar report attributed this to the inability of Muslims to reap the benefits of planning, noting that while progressing through the operation of trickle down or percolation effect; Muslims have gradually slipped further and further behind other socially marginalized communities. It concluded that survey of changes in educational patterns across socially marginalized communities suggest that SCs and STs have reaped at least some advantages of targeted government and private action supporting their educational progress. These are about affirmative action – the policy of reservation in educational institutions in proportion to their share of the population. There is nothing like this for Muslims, at least at the national level.

An assessment of the working of schemes for Muslims (after Sachar report), based on qualitative research in three districts with large Muslim populations, had revealed serious drawbacks in the working of those schemes. These were traced to a combination of factors: poor design of so-called flagships programmes for Muslim development, poor resourcing of the programmes, resulting in them being little more than symbolic gestures, if even that; and a weak institutional environment that prevents robust implementation – the last to include weak and adhoc structures and processes, and poor capacities of implementing agencies, combined with a pervasive inability on the part of those agencies to connect purposefully with Muslim groups and communities. (Centre for Equity Studies, 2011:40).

The evaluation reported that a handful of stand-alone schemes and projects, with

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modest budgets and coverage, and little thought for integrating those as a comprehensive programme for Muslim uplift tailored to the specific needs of the community, resulted in very little impact. There seemed little focused monitoring too, to check outputs and impact, indeed little disaggregated data collection and tracking. And rather than combining universal and targeting approaches, so as to target improvements in living conditions of Muslims using ‘universal’ development measures and approaches (not culturally-defined ones), so as to mainstream the community, the interventions, in the final analysis, though intended for Muslims and other minorities, became an area programme, with little especially for Muslims. Needless to add, in the absence of this, there was little support to improve capital accumulation or attempt to help increase returns on the capital that could have helped undo the inequalities. The report, pointing to how unambitious the interventions have been, noted how ‘....diffidence at policy level to clearly focus on Muslims and their deprivations translates into active reluctance by implementing agencies on the ground, to target Muslims and the drivers of their deprivations..’

Hasan et al say much the same to explain the dismal outcomes for Muslims. Criticising the area approach of programmes for Muslims (Multi---Sectoral Development Programme, MsDP particularly) rather than addressing their specific backwardness, and labelling them as minority programmes – demonstrating the anomaly at the heart of policy making for Muslims, targeting Muslims not as Muslims, but as Minorities, under the guise of unconstitutionality of programming along ‘communal’ lines. (Hasan, 2013:8) They point to the ‘...the failure (of the state) to enlarge the scope of state intervention and budgetary allocation to reverse (Muslim) deprivation’. This is despite Sachar committee, as the authors note, having firmly succeeded in reconstructing the Muslim community as ‘developmental subjects’ of the state, rather than as a religious and cultural community’.

This then is the central failure of policy making for Muslims in India – inability to see Muslims as a legitimate subject of development, and by extension, of affirmative action policies. There have been many attempts by powerful policy bodies to get the Government to sharpen the Muslim focus of its ‘Minority’ programmes. But these have yielded little results, showing how entrenched the opposition is on implementation, but more dramatically at policy level. The National Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, in its memorandum on Muslim rights asked for the government to sharpen its Muslim focus. And the Standing

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committee of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment severely criticised the performance of Government on minority welfare, making the point that Ministry of Minority Welfare was not addressing the root of the problem highlighted in the Sachar report. (Hasan, 2013: 247). And yet moves proposing establishing Diversity Commission and Equal Opportunities Commission, made by the Government's own Expert Group on Diversity Index to equalise opportunities, turned out to be non-starters for want of adequate political support, and proposals for a minority sub-plan, on the lines of Tribal Sub Plan and SC Special Plan, were shot down by the Planning Commission, arguing it would communalise the planning process, again citing constitutional hurdles.

Educational disadvantage impacts the long-term prospects of any community, by constraining social mobility and worsening exclusion, marginalisation and alienation. As 14 per cent of the population, Muslims are a significant minority who can help deliver India's future growth, if only they were given an even chance. Much of the difference in Hindu-Muslim educational outcomes relates to Muslim families being poorer and larger as well as to parents within these families being less educated than those of other groups. Having said this, even when we compare children from similar economic and family backgrounds, the Muslim schooling disadvantage does not disappear. The percentage of young Muslim women in higher education can only increase if future education policy initiatives explicitly target Muslim children and address the specificities of the causes of their disadvantage. In this context Tamil Nadu can serve as a model because it is the only State that has successfully closed the Hindu-Muslim and gender gaps both in school enrolment and completion, and higher education.

An impartial analysis of the ground realities depicts that the poor performance of Muslims in education emanates from a host of factors starting from abject poverty and communal/cultural discrimination to poorly designed course contents. So in order make the Indian education system more inclusive, the issues need to be addressed explicitly. A general attempt of setting up schools in the Muslim majority areas or providing scholarships to some students may not promise a substantial amelioration of the situation.

As the problem is complicated, so will be the solution. The mainstreaming and improving the plight of minorities stands as a challenge to Muslims as a community and the Government (s) as the state. Muslims as a community, will have to bear their share of the

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burden by actively engaging themselves to the discussion as to what are the reasons behind their poor participation and performance, what could be solutions, how they could be implemented. Muslim leadership and Civil societies must become pro-active rather than maintaining a reactive stance.

The government must provide a platform for equitable participation and inclusive growth. First of all, creating sufficient awareness about various existing facilities, schemes and programmes is very important. Affirmative action to address the serious issue need to be undertaken. Considering the gravity of the situation, a constitutional amendment may become necessary to provide justice to the religious minorities who are suffering because of the constitutional discrimination against Muslims. Muslims being as backward as SCs/STs, are not getting the benefits of reservations simply because their religious identity. So, this issue needs to be given due consideration so that reservation can be extended to Muslims like any other community. Thus, the government should allocate at least 10% of the seats in existing Navoday Vidyalayas, the 3500 Model Schools to be set up under the directives of the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) declared in April 2010, and any other similar public institutions.

Another integrative measure will be to recruit Muslim teachers in the schools. In the absence of Muslim teachers, the students from Muslim community may feel alienated in the school, as it has been pointed out in the SCR. Induction of 10 to 15% Muslim teachers and a good proportion of female teachers will not only encourage Muslims students, especially Muslim Girls, to attend and continue schooling but will also promote equity and justice in employment and hence will address the economic and gender disparity.

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