

# Contemporary Muslim Women in India: A Critical Study of Literacy

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## ABSTRACT

*At present, a major challenge Muslim women in India are facing is illiteracy which needs to be observed and analyzed in larger context of problems faced by the Muslim community at large, especially in light of their status as religious minorities. The prominent underlying causes are without doubt the poor socio-economic conditions they are living in and lack of awareness among Muslim women regarding their rights. The intrusion of ideas like - woman does not need to have education since her prime duties are only to please husband, breed children and do the household drudgery has further aggravated her dismal state of literacy. Furthermore, women's passive and blind reliance on the clerical class for their understanding of the scripture and tradition is also a major contributing factor behind ignorance towards their rights. To make headway in understanding this challenge, need is to move beyond the mere citing of rights mentioned in the scripture and address the issue in a pragmatic manner. This paper aims to highlight this very concern and the possible solutions thereof in the Indian context.*

**Keywords:** *Challenge, India, literacy, Muslim women, Rights, Scripture.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The present condition of Muslim women in India and the challenges they are facing is to be observed in the larger context of the situation and problems faced by Muslim communities at large, especially in light of their status as religious minorities. A cursory observation reveals that there is a continuous discrepancy between women's rights as envisaged in the scripture and the traditions, and their actual status in Muslim societies at present. Despite the fact that Islam raised the status of women in geometrical proportion against the background of blind patriarchy and slave-like status of women in the then prevailing *jahilliya* society, their status however got reversed to an unprivileged lot, somewhat similar to the *jahilliya* period, about a century after prophet Muhammad's demise. The injunctions about the status, rights and privileges of women got misinterpreted since the interpreters mostly being men got influenced by the patriarchal culture of the conquered lands and also were dominant in their respective societies. Consequently the status of woman also got reduced to a lower level due to intrusion of ideas like - woman does not need to have education, the duties of women are only to please their husbands, to breed children and to do household drudgery. Therefore they do not require any education at all. The Indian Muslim society at present is no exception to this unfortunate intrusion.

## II. MUSLIM WOMEN IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

The Indian Muslim community comprises 12 percent of a population of 929 million and constitutes from 7 to 30 percent of each state population, except in Kashmir (97 percent).<sup>1</sup> India itself being one of the least literate societies in the world, within this broader picture of social disadvantage, Muslim women being a minority

within a minority<sup>ii</sup>, their literacy levels are further skewed towards the bottom. Just like the Muslim communities, Muslim women are also not a monolith. There are Muslim women belonging to different sects like *Maliki Sunni*, *Dawoodi Bohra*, etc.; different social groups like *Ashraf*, *Ajlaf*, *Julaha*, Untouchables, *Pathans*, and different regional lingui-cultural groups like Punjabi, Kashmiri, Bengali, Tamil, etc.<sup>iii</sup>. Muslim women have been and continue to be subject to double discrimination - gender discrimination due to traditional patriarchy on one side and discrimination against religious minorities on the other. The result is their exclusion in large numbers. Their condition is claimed to be even worse than the dalit women. A prominent reason that the pro-women laws also have failed to achieve progress for Muslim women is primarily because of their own lack of knowledge of rights and the lack of effective support in accessing these rights. The foremost area where they are miserably lagging behind is literacy. Although they are subject to same political and socio-economic factors influencing status of all Indian women, yet their position is affected by their community's minority position. As far as the issue of traditional patriarchy prevailing in the Muslim community is concerned, it has been found to be more detrimental to the cause of literacy of Muslim women than any other factor. Even though Muslim women play a crucial role in the well being and the very survival of their families, but unfortunately for various reasons the gender disparity is very much conspicuous in Muslim societies. It's a well known fact that the prevalent socio-cultural pattern of Muslim households doesn't encourage literacy much among girls because of the belief that it's not important for them and also they have this suspicion that modern education may instill a wrong set of values in them.

#### I. A Glimpse of the Dismal Literacy Status

In analyzing the literacy status of Muslim women, the data produced in census of 2001 by the National Sample Survey Organization can be depended upon as the main source of information. According to this census, the population of Muslim women was estimated at around 62.5 million.<sup>iv</sup> A survey undertaken in nine states of India (Kerala, Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal) revealed 66 per cent Muslim women as illiterate. Illiteracy is most widespread in Haryana while Kerala has least illiteracy among Muslim women closely followed by Tamil Nadu.<sup>v</sup> Over the last two decades, the position of Muslim women particularly their social situation has come to the notice of academicians, policy makers and development authorities of India and it has been found out that they are the most deprived segment of the country's population especially when it comes to literacy. According to an ORG-MARG Muslim Women's Survey conducted in 2000-2001, in 40 districts spanning 12 states, the enrollment percentage of Muslim girl students has been found to be mere 40.66 per cent, as a consequence of which the proportion of Muslim women in higher education is a mere 3.56 per cent, lower even than that of scheduled castes (4.25 per cent).<sup>vi</sup> The data produced by 61st Round National Sample Survey Organization (2004-05) concluded that the enrollment ratio has increased in all socio-religious communities but this advancement is 65 percent among Muslims as compared to schedule caste and schedule tribe which is 95 percent. According to Yoginder Sikand while only 2.7 per cent of Muslim women had studied beyond high school, the corresponding figures for Hindu, Christian, Sikh and Jain women were 11.7 per cent, 16 per cent and 30.5 per cent respectively. He further states that over the past few years the enrollment rate in elementary schools among Muslim females in India has actually been witnessing a considerable decline<sup>vii</sup> (Fig. 1). The right to education especially at the primary level is mandated by the Constitution of India, yet over six decades after Independence

less than 50% of Muslim women in India are literate compared with women from other minorities - 76% literacy among Christians, 64% among Sikhs, 62% among Buddhists and 90% among Jain women.

### Education Of Urban Females Based On Religious Communities, 2009-10

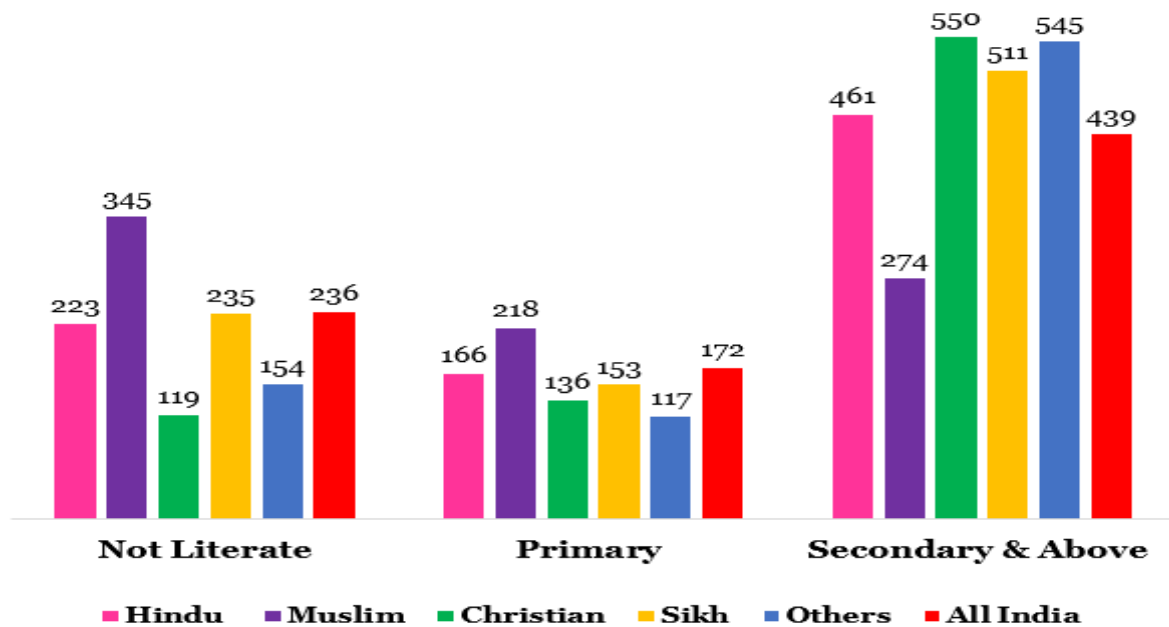


Figure. 1. Comparison between communities showing education disparities. (Source: National Sample Survey Office)

#### II. Illiteracy: Prominent Factors

##### i. Socio-Economic Scenario

In rural as well as urban India, Muslim girls are still compelled to stay at homes (first their own, then that of their husbands') and engage in domestic chores. Moreover a complex web of circumstances makes the schooling of Muslim girls even more a daunting task. For instance, there is a fair degree of conservatism, a general mistrust towards modern-style education and even a tendency to treat education for girls as being not entirely necessary, sometimes even viewed as an impediment in getting a girl married. Even if girls are enrolled in schools they are withdrawn at an early age to marry them off. This leads to a higher drop-out rate among Muslim girls. There may be many outside factors as well contributing to this situation like non availability of schools within easy reach for girls at lower levels of education, absence of girl's hostels, lack of infrastructural facilities for education in Muslim concentrated areas and absence of female teachers. Still, even if girls get enrolled in schools, it is only half the battle because it is meaningful only if they complete the minimum of 8 years of schooling which requires that their families be able to resist the pressures of income generation and work at home. But a fact is those who do manage entry do not seem to be able to continue schooling, let alone go on to higher education.

In a study conducted by Sabiha Husain, Muslim women have expressed that the structural and institutional factors like irrational customs and value system, patriarchal structure, misinterpretation of rights and duties, lack

of self initiative or motivation, lack of co-operation from male members of the household, etc. hinders women to adopt new values and change, rather than the religious factors<sup>viii</sup>. But due to the prevalence of illiteracy, low standard of living, poverty and dependency they are attracted towards the reforms with a slow pace.<sup>ix</sup> They do approve of the progressive decisions and arguments in favor of their improvement but due to fear of the prevailing conservatism in the community they tend to oppose such moves.

## ii. Politicization of Literacy: A Stumbling Block

In Muslim communities the demand for reform is often interpreted by most of the self-proclaimed religio-political leaders as an attempt to destroy Muslim identity. Any attempt to suggest reforms are treated with suspicion and hostility<sup>x</sup> for they fear would lose their identity and it would eventually amount to westernization of their social system. Moreover every question of social reform is viewed from religious or political point of view. For instance the introduction of learning English language initially was debarred as something not less than blasphemy and its propagator Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was criticized as a *kafir* (infidel). He was the one who supported the cause of women and devoted his entire life for their upliftment, given the fact that literacy and modern education were beyond the reach of average Muslim women caged in the conservative set-up. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first education minister of Independent India, considered an appropriate education policy even more important than an industrial policy for a successful democracy. He asserted

*Every individual has a right to an education that will enable him to develop his faculties and live a full human life. Such education is the birth right of every citizen. A state cannot claim to have discharged its duty till it has provided for every single individual the means to the acquisition of knowledge and self-betterment." ... "regardless of the question of employment the state must make available to all citizens the facilities of education up to the secondary stage."*<sup>xi</sup>

But the misfortune is that the above mentioned mindset is dominant even today. The pseudo leaders due to their insecure thinking are proving a big hurdle in any kind of transition attempt made for women or by women themselves. One of the biggest dilemmas Muslim women face today is they have hardly any say in managing their own affairs. Issues related to women tend to be politicized which has made it almost difficult to deal with them. Muslim women's position has worsened also because there is an attempt to 'safeguard' the community's identity that generally prevents Muslim women to participate in development processes. One such consequence is that majority i.e. 69.75 percent Muslim women do not want to educate their daughters beyond the primary level of education. Further, many middle class women who have requisite qualifications are not allowed to seek employment because 'community respectability' is likely to get smeared.<sup>xii</sup> All these predicaments have resulted in general backwardness of Muslims and particularly Muslim women in India. Furthermore, dominance of patriarchy has a major role to play in issues related to Muslim women. According to Asghar Ali Engineer it is not religion which has been usually blamed but patriarchy which is the real culprit. So unless patriarchal values and patriarchal structures are dispensed with, the societal attitude towards women will continue to deprive them of their genuine rights.<sup>xiii</sup>

## iii. Government Apathy

Even as the Constitution of India has granted Muslim women equal educational opportunities without any discrimination with regard to their minority status<sup>xiv</sup>, their dismal condition on the whole has been ignored by the government. In India every community, in matters relating to family, inheritance, education, etc., is governed by the Personal Laws of the concerned community. Although protection of the Personal Law is not considered as the fundamental right of the community or its members, yet the right to culture granted to communities has been used to advocate non-interference of the state in the Personal Laws. In so far as the communities' Personal laws are concerned, they are generally biased towards women and the continuation of these laws has hindered the process of ensuring gender equality for all sections of the population. Therefore, because the government has treated the condition of Muslim women as a mere by-product of the community's personal law, this lax attitude has in turn resulted in a big gap between noble intentions and actual realization of the constitutional provisions.

## III.Rural-Urban Literacy Scenario

Muslim females in both rural and urban India lag behind their counterparts in school enrolment from the very beginning. This initial disadvantage is further exacerbated across subsequent educational enrollment categories. A comparison across socio religious communities also reveals constantly lower level of mean year schooling for the Muslim women. In Urban India, 59.5 per cent of Muslim women are illiterate as compared to 42.2 per cent of Hindu women and 22.7 per cent of Christian women who come under this category. There is some semblance of parity between urban Hindu (17.2 per cent) and Muslim (18.5 per cent) women with reference to primary education which widens considerably for corresponding figures for middle school which is 25.3 per cent for urban Hindu women, and 16.8 per cent for Muslim women – the difference being much greater when compared to Christian women (33.4 per cent). Only 4.3 per cent of urban Muslim women have secondary education, compared to 10.7 percent of Hindu women and 20.8 per cent of Christian women.<sup>xv</sup> The figure for rural Muslim females attending school in 5-9 age groups is 32.8 per cent compared to 40.6 percent for Hindu women, and the Muslim rural female enrollment for the 20+ age group is 1.4 percent as against 7.4 per cent for Hindu women. The statistics clearly reflect that Muslim girls' schooling is not really encouraged in the community itself. Muslim women in urban India are much worse off than their rural counterparts not only in terms of their overall educational status as citizens of India but also in terms of their relatively poor educational status when compared to Hindu or Christian women. In fact nearly 60 percent of the total Muslim respondents never attended school. The correlation between education and employment also among Muslims is negative. There is a minuscule proportion of Muslims in formal employment or wealth-creating occupations. The work participation rate has been estimated at around 11.4 per cent for urban Muslim women and 20 per cent for rural Muslim women. The proportion of Muslim women who are illiterate is substantially higher for rural north India than for the entire country — more than 85 per cent reported themselves to be illiterate. Fewer than 17 per cent of Muslim women ever enrolled in school completed eight years of schooling and fewer than 10 per cent completed higher secondary education which is below the national average.<sup>xvi</sup> The statistics are all the more alarming when compared to the overall advances in female education achieved at the turn of the century.

### III.NEED OF TRANSITION & SOLUTIONS THEREOF

Muslim women are no doubt showing tendency towards literacy as they do get motivated on witnessing women from other communities not just becoming literate but also pursuing higher education and contributing towards income. Besides this, Muslim women are also strongly undergoing the realization that in present day circumstances an illiterate woman has to face various odds not only outside but at home as well. But the above mentioned statistics clearly express that the present state of Muslim women is such that no single institution be it government or private can bring about a lasting change unless and until an attempt is made from within the Muslim community itself. Therefore the first attempt towards transition needs to be undertaken by Muslim women themselves. The foremost step in bettering their lot as well as of their community is fortifying themselves with literacy. But literacy here does not imply in the sense that one is able to read and write in English language only. Rather it implies that Muslim women need to equip themselves at least in three languages – Arabic, Urdu and English. Arabic language so that they are able to comprehend the scripture and know their rights thereof; Urdu language because it's the language which is spoken most in the Muslim community of India; and last but not least English so as to be able to correspond to the outside world since it's a universal language.

Secondly, a survey of availability of textbooks in regional languages also needs to be undertaken. More Urdu medium schools with better facilities and women staff too can go a long way in encouraging girls to go to schools. But at the end of the day, be it an English-medium-modern style education or an Urdu-medium traditional education, what Muslim women need today is some form of knowledge that empowers them to better their lot. It is to be noted that in the last fifty years or so, after independence, profound changes have been noticed in almost every aspect of women's lives but women from the Muslim community have remained an exception to these changes.

Thirdly, there are also many Muslim households who detest enrolling their daughters in co-ed institutions on the argument that co-ed environment is detrimental to moral development - be it boy or girl. Since it's not a day's job bringing a change in their thinking and the related inhibitions, the only option to tackle this hurdle is separate institutions be established, especially colleges, preferably near the residential areas. This in turn can generate and encourage the influx of female teachers, also coming from such family backgrounds.

Fourthly, given the increasing incidents of communal violence where women and young girls are the easiest targets, parents are often wary of sending girls to unsafe neighborhoods. So if more schools will be located in or closer to Muslim-dominated areas, more parents would be willing to enroll their girl child. The Sachar Committee Report talks of this co-relation between place of residence and education to be especially effective in communally sensitive areas. A good example of this is the feeder schools of the Jamia Millia Islamia that cater to the disadvantaged sections living in the urban ghettos of Jamia Nagar, Shaheen Bagh, Batla House, etc.<sup>xvii</sup> They have managed to attract and retain enough girl students right up till middle and senior school because of convenient location. The morning shift school is Urdu-medium till the 8<sup>th</sup> standard and English-medium thereafter. Students who switch from Urdu-medium to English manage to do well due to better teaching aids, better textbooks and above all enough Urdu-medium female teachers – a combination that has been found to be lacking in most government-run Urdu schools.

The fifth step towards bettering the lot of Muslim women depends also to a great extent on addressing the challenges prevalent in the Muslim society. As already stated one of the major hurdles in the literacy progress of Muslim women is the socio-cultural pattern of Muslim households. The conservative mindset of Muslim households needs to be done away with through deliberations and mobilization by the Muslim educationists and intellectuals.

Lastly there is an urgent need to reinterpret the scripture in accordance with the needs and circumstances of present times since the bygone interpretations are unlikely to be accepted by women today. Literacy being a human right, awareness is to be created that denial of this human right especially to women means tampering with the developmental potentials of half the world's human resource.

#### IV.CONCLUSION

India being known as the largest democracy, one of the indicators of how successful a democracy is to what extent the rights of minorities have been achieved. Given this fact, Muslim women being a minority within minority are at a double disadvantage today with low level of education combined with low quality of education. Their deprivation gets even more prominent as the overall level of education within other communities is on rise. Despite the fact that they are among the most backward sections of Indian society, they have not received adequate attention of the Government, social workers and academicians. Lack of education, poverty, economic dependency and most prominently ignorance of their rights due to illiteracy has made them more and more vulnerable to exploitation. There is, therefore, an acute need to study and identify problems specific to Muslim women and delineate the causes of their backwardness. Muslim women in India are potential catalysts for development. Their emancipation and empowerment therefore can be a crucial step in the development of the Muslim community as well as the country itself.

#### REFERENCES

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<sup>ii</sup> Since they are at disadvantage both at the hands of the Government as well as the Muslim community

<sup>iii</sup> Dr. Babasaheb T. Kazi , "Muslim Women: Challenges and Opportunities", 1994, p. 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Rakhshanda Jalil, Educating Muslim Women in Modern India, *Dialogue– A quarterly journal*, January-March, 2010, Volume 11 No. 3, p.1

<sup>v</sup> Dr. Babasaheb T. Kazi, "Muslim Women: Challenges and Opportunities", 1994, p. 3.

<sup>vi</sup>Yoginder Sikand, 2001, *Muslim women most backward*, p.8.  
<<http://www.islmaicvoice.com/august.99/community.html>>

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid; 4

<sup>ix</sup> Sabiha Hussain, "The changing half: a study of Indian Muslim woman", New Delhi: Vedam Books, 1998, p. 20.

<sup>x</sup> Barbara Metcalf, 1996, *Islam and women, the case of the tablighi Jamma'at*  
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<sup>xi</sup> [http://www.ummid.com/news/2013/june/02.06.2013/maulana\\_azad\\_n\\_education.html](http://www.ummid.com/news/2013/june/02.06.2013/maulana_azad_n_education.html)

<sup>xii</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, "Islam Women and Gender Justice", Bombay: Institute of Islamic Studies, 2005, p.348

<sup>xiii</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, "Problems of Muslim women in India- an introduction", Bombay: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1993, p.2

<sup>xiv</sup> Articles 29 and 30 of the Constitution of India.

<sup>xv</sup> Seema Kazi, "Muslim Women In India", Minority Rights Group International, 1999, p.30.

<sup>xvi</sup> Rakhshanda Jalil, Educating Muslim Women in Modern India: Problems and Perspectives, *Dialogue – A quarterly journal*, January-March, 2010, Volume 11 No. 3, 1.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid, 3