



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Education of Muslim Minority in India: Understanding Contemporary Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This article critically assesses the educational conditions of the Muslim minority in India, situating them within the broader socio-economic and political contexts. Although the largest religious minority, with a population of around 14.2% of the country, Muslims are still one of the most marginalized groups in literacy, school attendance, and university enrollment. Based on Census statistics, NSSO surveys, the Sachar Committee Report, and secondary research, the study reveals consistent educational gaps compared to other religious groups. Literacy rates among Muslim women, and by extension, Muslim populations in general, are drastically lower than the national average, and Gross Enrolment Rates in higher education continue to remain abysmally low, pointing towards a stunted educational journey. The article also discusses structural limitations like poverty, poor infrastructure for schooling in Muslim-dense regions, language, and gendered socio-cultural norms that constrain educational opportunity, particularly for girls. It contends that constitutional assurances and minority safeguard measures, while ostensibly progressive in principle, have failed to be realized equally due to low intensity of implementation and systemic disregard. The paper ends with an emphasis on the necessity for the above interventions with focused intensity, such as scaling up well-functioning government schools, gender-sensitive policies, bilingual education, vocational training, and proper integration of ICT. With these measures, if pursued with sincere political will and public participation, they could greatly contain disparities, empower Muslim youth, and make them whole participants in India's developmental and democratic processes.

Key words: Muslim minority, Minority Community, Literacy, School Education, Higher Education, Gender Disparities, Educational Challenges, Socio-Economic Backwardness.

Introduction

"It does not take a majority to prevail ... but rather an irate, tireless minority, keen on setting brushfires of freedom in the minds of men."

— (Samuel Adams)

Education is the only mean for the all-around development of man and to draw innate abilities as well as to prepare a good citizen and complete human. Education is the key to sustainable development and economic growth of the country along with justice and equality in the society as well as scientific and technical development and cultural preservation. Today, India has the most youth in comparison to the other countries of the entire globe and they are future leaders and architects of the country, consequently empowering the youth means brightening the future of the country. Education gives a foundation for a better tomorrow and trains generations for the future (Alam & Zahoor, 2019). Education supports improving the standard of human lives to strengthen individuals and enhance the prosperity of human beings. Education, indeed, goes beyond what takes place within the four walls of a classroom. An individual gets an education anywhere from his/her experiences inside and outside the educational institutions (Alam, 2021). History witnesses that not a single country or society developed without education in the past and the situation be more complex by preparing human resource development (Alam, & Ahmad, 2023).

In the field of education, the disparity and inequality among different religious communities and castes is a big issue and a subject of extensive research, policy-making and policy analysis. The condition of Muslims both economically and educationally as shown in multiple studies and literature is terrible and frightening. Sachar committee reports reveals that Muslims are more backward than SC, ST and OBCs (Zoie, Rashid, & Pulwama, 2018). According to the National Sample Survey, Muslims are mainly engaged in self-employment and rural labour and they are at bottom of the regular wages and salaried category. Due to insufficient scholarship, unfavorable loan system and indifference of the administration, educational disparity and lack of people based on caste, race, gender and religion still exist. The vision of the Ministry of Education (MHRD) highlights the awareness of affirmative action among policymakers and describes equitable access to higher education as an elusive goal (Joshi, & Ahir, 2013).

In terms of population, India is one of the largest and most densely populated countries of the world and in terms of civilization, it is also well-known and has a commendable history in the past which is identified with unity in diversity. The beauty of the country lies in its constitution which provides equal rights to all citizens and ensures protection for backward classes and minorities. Despite all these qualities, even today a large group in the country is suffering from socio-economic and educational backwardness including minority communities. According to the National Commission for Minorities, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Muslims are among the minority communities in the country and the constitution of India also gives many privileges and rights for their protection. Islam is the second largest religion in the country with about 195 million followers and as per the Pew Research Center, the number of Muslims in 2020 will be 213 million which is about 16 per cent of the country's total population (Lugo, Cooperman, O'Connell, & Stencel, 2011).

Minority Communities in India

There is no clear definition of the minority in the Indian constitution but in Articles 29, 30, 350-A & 350-B the word has been mentioned. The word minority mentioned in Article 29 of the constitution of India means a section of the citizens of this country whose language and culture are completely different (Pandharipande, 2002) and Article 30 mentions two types of minorities such as religious and linguistic and other two Articles 350-A & B deal with the rights and protection of linguistic minorities (Singh, 2006 & Thakur, 2013). The minority is a term that is defined in different fields where it is defined in different ways but in a common language, it refers to a small number of people and groups having ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic identities and traditions in the country. According to The United Nations Programme for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (known as UN Women), the category of minority includes those people and communities who have the following characteristics (Nadia, 2021):

1. In a state whose number is less than the remaining population
2. Those who are not in a dominant position
3. Those who are citizens of a state or groups with close and long ties to the state
4. Having different linguistic, religious or ethnic characteristics from the remaining population
5. who highlight their sense of solidarity to protect different collective identities

Various terms have been used to express the meaning of minority such as backward group, ethnic people, sub-cultural nation etc. (Bisht, 2018).

Religion	Number (in crores)	Percentage (%)
Hindu	96.63	79.8
Muslim	17.22	14.2
Christian	2.78	2.3
Sikh	2.08	1.7
Buddhist	0.84	0.7
Jain	0.45	0.4
Other religions and persuasions	0.79	0.7
Religion not stated	0.29	0.2
Total	121.08	100

Source: Census of India, 2011

Muslim Community in the Country

The Indian Muslim community is the most populous religious minority in India and one of the largest Muslim communities across the world, both demographically and socio-culturally. The Census of India (2011) puts Muslims at about 14.2% of the country's population, which is equivalent to about 172 million people. India is a home to the third-largest population of Muslims in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan. Spread unevenly throughout the country, Muslims are concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Maharashtra, and Kerala, with large urban concentrations in Delhi, Hyderabad, and Lucknow (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2016). The community is extremely diverse on linguistic, cultural, and sectarian lines, including Sunnis, Shias, Bohras, and others, which is an extension of India's broader plural social order (Engineer, 2004). Researchers have indicated that although Muslims are a large number, they also tend to suffer from socio-economic disadvantages like fewer years of education, greater poverty rates, and fewer opportunities for work in the public and private sectors, as seen in the Sachar Committee Report (Government of India, 2006).

The demographic importance of the Muslim community and its historical role in shaping Indian art, architecture, and culture serve to underscore the need for analysing their population trends not merely as statistical data but as a key factor in determining the social and political dynamics of India (Hasan,

2017). In addition, the sustained population growth of the Muslim population, which is expected to grow steadily over the next few decades, highlights the need for inclusive policies and minority welfare initiatives to counter disparities and drive balanced development (Pew Research Center, 2015). Therefore, the research on the Muslim population in India is not simply a demographic study but also an integral part of comprehending the details of Indian society, governance, and development patterns.

Education of Muslim Minority

According to the Sachar Committee report, 50 per cent of Muslim women are illiterate and their socio-economic conditions are pathetic. The voice of Muslims could not raise due to a lack of visionary leadership and due to the failure of welfare schemes and programs. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon stated that 75 per cent of Muslim women in India are illiterate, compared to 85 per cent in the rural north (Hasan, & Menon, 2004). There is a need to create a favorable environment for the education and training of Muslim women and to take useful and effective measures to remove the limitations. Allama Iqbal has described women as the root of society and civilization and Islam has also emphasized women's education.

Sociologist Coleman considers education an important tool and reason for reducing inequality in society. Thus, a view was presented that education is a process that provides means of access to ends and ends and equal opportunities for later life (Coleman, 1975). A society can never achieve social equality if the method of acquiring education is unequal. Therefore, to overcome social and economic inequality, it is necessary to bring equality in access, method and quality of education (Smith, & Kozleski, 2005). Both Bourdieu and Coleman have the same position. Therefore, for the education of Muslims, all the people of this country, especially the government, should try and establish educational institutions in their area to ensure the provision of quality education.

Literacy of Muslim Minority

As per the census of 2011, 31.46 per cent of Muslims in India are illiterate and on the other hand, Jain is the most literate minority community followed by Christians and Buddhists (Krishan, & Chauhan, 2016). Given below table shows the community-wise literacy states that Muslim literacy is below all religious communities of the country (Haneefa, 2020).

Religion Wise Literacy Rate

Religion	Population (+7 years)	Male	Female
Hindu	73.27	81.70	64.34
Muslim	68.54	74.73	62.04
Christian	84.53	87.70	81.47
Sikh	75.39	80.03	70.31
Buddhist	81.29	88.31	74.04
Jain	94.88	96.78	92.91
Other Religion	59.90	70.89	49.07
Religion not Stated	74.69	81.95	67.31
Total	72.98	80.88	64.63

Source: Census of India, 2011 (Children of below 7 years have not been included)

The literacy rate is considered the basis for measuring and evaluating educational progress. Census of 2011 shows that even after 75 years of independence, the educational situation of the Muslim minority is not satisfactory. The literacy rate of the Muslim minority in this country is 68.54 per cent while the national literacy rate is 72.98 per cent. A comparison of the literacy rate with all other religious minority communities showed that Muslims have the lowest literacy rate and this dismal situation in the field of education is unmatched by any other minority community in this country (Narula, 2014). The analysis of the literacy rate of all communities concludes that the literacy rate of Muslims is the lowest in the country and they are backwards in all fields of life including education. Social marginalization and education deprivation have made the Muslim minority more backward than SCs, STs and other minority communities in the country. The lack of public schools in Muslim areas and the lack of basic infrastructure and facilities of these schools as well as poverty force the children of this community to enroll in Maktabas and Madrasas (Park, & Niyozov, 2008).

School Education of Muslim Minority

Below given table clearly shows that even in school education Muslims are backward in comparison to other religious communities in the country (Kafi, 2020).

Net Attendance Ratio of Different Religious Communities (%)

Community	Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Above Higher Secondary
Hindus	84	65	54	39	13
Muslims	79	55	39	24	7
Christians	87	70	63	51	18
Sikhs	86	65	55	52	15
Other Religious	87	63	71	39	13
All	83	63	52	58	12

Source: NSSO 71st Round (2014)

The above given data comprising school and higher education reveals that the Muslim minority is educationally lagging behind other all religious minority communities of the country which is alarming to the country and shocking for the society.

Muslim Minority in Higher Education

The higher education system in India is very complex as various ministries and regulatory bodies are intertwined. The country has a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 15% which is much lower than the global average. Higher education is closely related to the human development index and is very important for undeveloped communities. Higher education is indeed an individual in growth and all-round development as well as prepares useful citizens and successful people in society (Joshi, 2006). Disparities in enrolment ratios between religious groups are also evident in higher education, with Jains having the highest overall enrolment ratio followed by Christians, Sikhs and Muslims respectively. According to the Ministry of Human Resource and Development (Now the Ministry of Education) 2013. Details are as follows (Joshi, and Ahir, 2019).

Religion-Wise Enrollment Ratio in Higher Education

Religion	GER in Higher Education	Population
Hindu	20.0	79.8
Muslim	11.3	14.23
Christians	31.3	2.3
Buddhist	17.9	1.72
Jain	54.6	0.7
Zoroastrian	63.6	0.37

Census of India, 2011

Compared to other communities, the literacy rate of Muslims in the country is backward in higher education than basic education, whereas in today's era, higher education has become an essential factor for the development and progress of the community. The twenty-first century emphasizes the need to be socially and economically strong through research and specialization as well as expertise and higher education in the field of technology and science.

Issues and Challenges of Muslims

Muslims are an important minority community in the country but in most cases and walks of life, it is identified as a backward community. In India, Muslims are far behind other minority communities in socioeconomic, education etc. (Patra, Khan, Gayak, & Mukherjee, 2019).

1. Due to a lack of education, Muslims are suffering from poverty and economic weakness that caused the community to live in miserable conditions. Unemployment and financial helplessness force Muslim students to drop out of education and engage in low-income occupations.
2. The anti-Muslim attitude in the country also exists like an ugly stain since, which plays an important role in reducing the educational and socio-economic status of the community on many occasions. As a result, the education of Muslims is badly affected and employment opportunities become uncertain.
3. The high rate of illiteracy among Muslim women is a bitter truth of this country, which greatly affects its development. Based on several reasons, the Muslim community has turned into an unskilled population who is living with humiliation, disorder and ignorance.

4. In modern India, the lack of social security and the constant occurrence of riots have become a sad and shocking reality. Religious riots directly affect living conditions and necessities of life like the economy, education, health and law and order. The negative effects of corruption, marginalization and discrimination are common in society that mostly affect marginalized sections.
5. The low education rate of Muslim girls is a major hindrance to the socio-economic development of Muslims. A large number of Muslim parents discourage their girls from pursuing especially higher education because of their negative attitude towards girls' education.
6. Scarcity or lack of adequate quality education in schools located in Muslim-majority areas and inadequate provision of schools for girls are the main causes of educational backwardness among Muslims. Most of the schools are not in Urdu medium (medium of instruction) but Hindi and English medium schools provide sub-standard education. The absence of necessary resources and facilities and the lack and unavailability of teachers are characteristic of these schools.
7. Shortage of Schools; There is a shortage of schools in Muslim areas as compared to other religious communities and students have to travel long distances for education due to the non-availability of nearby schools.
8. Poverty and low income; Poverty is high in the Muslim minority community and Marcus Aurelius famously said that "poverty is the root of all evil". In general, Muslims have very few sources of income and their income is insufficient for survival. Shortage of public schools in their areas discourages parents from spending more on education, causing their children to miss out on education. According to the Sachar Committee report, 13% of the Muslim population is forced to live below the poverty line.
9. Inadequate infrastructure; The lack of adequate infrastructure facilities in schools located in Muslim areas such as no proper desks for sitting, no rooms for classes, no doors and windows in the building, no electricity, no drinking water, toilets and there are no washrooms and not enough trained teachers, etc. due to it, the quality of education is very poor and the desired goal of students cannot easily be achieved.
10. Non-Integration of ICT in schools; not availability of Information and Communication Technology and Computer education in schools in the Muslim area is a matter of concern. While other schools especially private ones provide education and training in Information and Communication Technology and Computers to their students that enable them to explore and acquire quality education.
11. Lack of funding; Scarcity and shortage of funds in schools located in Muslim areas is one of the major hurdles and due to it, these schools cannot buy desks, tables, blackboards and benches etc. and are unable to get the necessary infrastructure to be repaired.
12. Lack of technology; at present, we are living in a digital and technology-driven world and the current education system is also making the process of learning and teaching interesting and easy with the help of this technology. Unlike schools in other areas, schools in Muslim areas are not properly equipped with basic modern equipment such as computers, laptops, tablets, high-speed internet, Wi-Fi etc.
13. Linguistic barrier; UNESCO estimates that 04% of school-age children do not have access to education in their mother tongue, while most children can read and write in their mother tongue. Teaching and learning in the mother tongue can overcome language barriers.
14. Less emphasis on extracurricular and co-curricular activities suitable to their religious sentiments and beliefs; In schools of Muslim areas, students are not able to participate in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities like sports, swimming, singing, dancing and painting, etc., because there are no painting, dancing and physical education teachers in rural schools, while these activities are not available to children. It leads to comprehensive growth and development.
15. Non-teaching duties of teachers; Teachers in schools situated in Muslim areas are often assigned responsibility for non-teaching and non-academic activities such as election responsibility, collection of census data and several other responsibilities (e.g. liquor supervision in the state of Bihar etc.) which often keep teachers away from school and hinder educational activities.
16. Class promotion system; The Right to Education Act 2009 introduced a policy that no student would be failed up to the 8th grade and every student would be promoted to the next grade, known as the No Detention Policy (NDP). Under this policy, despite poor performance, students are promoted to the next grade, thereby damaging the quality of education.
17. Unemployment; The small number of Muslims are in the government and non-government jobs of the country. The current formal education system not ensuring job opportunities is a major reason which Muslim parents are not interested in providing educational opportunities for their daughters.
18. Costly Education; The RTE Act, of 2009 talks about free and compulsory basic education but in reality the current education system has other costs. People living below the poverty line are unable to afford the cost of education, resulting in children dropping out of their school.
19. Lack of Infrastructure; Considering the growing population, India needs more schools and teachers to meet the basic needs of RTE. There is also a need to address the deficiencies of adequate and necessary quantity of materials and infrastructure in schools to meet the present-day mandatory educational needs.
20. Lack of Scope for Vocational Education; Due to economic necessity, most of the poor Muslim families are looking for initial employment, which can be ensured through proper vocational education, but is not provided by schools and the government. Vocational education is not accessible to everyone due to a lack of effort.

Issues and Challenges Faced by Muslim Women

Various educationalists and social leaders have discussed various problems and challenges faced by Muslim women in education, but those been described by Unissa as follows (Unissa, 2018):

1. **The Dominance of Patriarchy:** The Muslim minority community is still somewhat bound by patriarchy. Consequently, women's lives and dreams are subordinated to men's in the community. In a Muslim family, a girl's educational opportunities completely depend on the will of the male members of the family.
2. **Religious Misunderstanding:** Islam makes education compulsory for every individual and women's education is not prohibited in Islam at all. During the time of the Prophet (Peace be upon him), the companions of the Prophet (Sahabis) including male and female were also educated. It is said about Hazrat Aisha that she had a great store of knowledge which she used to learn from the Prophet. Regardless of gender, basic education is required in Islam for every person and Islam has declared knowledge as a lost heritage. But till today, many Muslims are suffering from misunderstanding about the education of Muslim women.
3. **Social Pressure:** Muslim parents are often get pressurized by society to uphold and stop their girls' education at an early stage. Because it is misunderstood that higher educational qualifications may prevent their daughters from getting married.
4. **Child Marriage:** In India, early marriage of Muslim girls is a common practice. According to the reports of the Government of India, 74% of girls in this country get married in adolescence. The minimum age of marriage for girls was 18 years, which was increased to 21 years in December 2021 by the Government of India.
5. **Child Labour:** Poor Muslim families send their girls to work as maids and thus these working girls are prevented from formal schooling and the formal education system.
6. **Human Trafficking:** According to the report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), an increase of 3.83% has been recorded in the number of cases of human trafficking in the last five years.
7. **Gender Discrimination:** In our society, very few people celebrate the birth of a girl child, most people recognize it as a burden. The girl child is not mostly encouraged to create her own independent identity in the country.

Conclusion

Muslim minority, though demographically large and culturally diverse, is structurally deprived in all major educational indices, with persistently lower literacy, attendance and higher-education enrolments compared with other religious groups. The Census-based literacy trends and NSSO attendance ratios show Muslims on the bottom rung of inter-community comparisons, while GER in higher education is significantly below national and minority averages, highlighting a truncated pipeline between primary and tertiary levels. These results are located within a broader ecology of constraints: poverty and insecure jobs, deficits in proximate government schools, poor infrastructure and ICT availability, language access barriers for Urdu-medium students, and heavy non-teaching responsibilities on teachers that add up to suppress instruction quality. Gendered obstacles such as patriarchal values, early marriage, security issues and economic limitations on family resources and also cut short Muslim girls' advancement, notwithstanding Islam and constitutional promises to education.

Although India's constitutional guarantees (Articles 29–30, 350-A/B) and policy rhetoric support minority rights, gaps in implementation water down their potential for Muslim-concentrated communities. Going ahead, the evaluation suggests an implementable agenda: increase and improve government schools in Muslim-concentrated districts to RTE-standard facilities and teacher standards; institutionalize bilingual (Urdu-regional) pedagogy and foundational learning support; scale targeted scholarships, transport/safety interventions and conditional cash transfers for girls; bridge to higher education through preparatory courses, hostels, and mentorship; mainstream vocational and digital skills with industry linkages; establish recognition routes between maktabas/madrasas and formal schooling and minimize teachers' non-academic tasks. Progress must be monitored through disaggregated information and people-centred governance so that entitlements become learning gains. Finally, placing equity, language-sensitive pedagogy and women's educational empowerment at the core is essential and not just to bridge existing deficits but to release the social, economic and civic returns that a comprehensively educated Muslim citizenry can bring to India's democratic progress.

“Democracy cannot survive without the guidance of a creative minority.”

— Harlan F. Stone

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