

EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF MUSLIMS IN INDIA : PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

HIJAB KHATOON¹

¹Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, U.P., INDIA (Assistant Professor, Political Science, Krishna Devi Girls Degree College, Alambagh, Lucknow, U.P., INDIA)

ABSTRACT

India has made considerable progress in the field of education. However, Indian Muslims are still excessively affected by low literacy and a lack of educational opportunities. Numerous policies and affirmative actions have been implemented to improve the educational backwardness of Indian Muslims, but the progress has been inadequate and slow. Through a comprehensive analysis of historical context, socio-economic factors and educational policies, this study aims to identify the root causes of educational backwardness among Indian Muslims. This study uses a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data and existing literature on the subject to analyse the educational exclusion and marginalisation of Indian Muslims. This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on educational equity in India and advocates for concerted efforts to ensure that all segments of society have an equal opportunity to succeed in the 21st-century knowledge economy.

KEYWORDS: Muslims, Education, Backwardness, Opportunity, Discrimination, Equity

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in determining the socio-economic development of a nation. It led to the upliftment and transformation of society by empowering the marginalised and excluded sections to have better control over their lives and life conditions by providing them with skills and the necessary qualifications to face life's challenges and change them for the better. Education has extraordinary power to lift communities from poverty, inertia and hopelessness. A truly educated population is an asset for any community because educated individuals are more productive, innovative, and adaptive and can contribute significantly to the growth and development of their families, community and the nation. Those who are better equipped with education have low levels of poverty and high standards of living because there is a deep interlinkage between high levels of education, better employment opportunities and overall economic advancement.

Since its independence, India has greatly expanded its educational infrastructure and opportunities and has toiled hard to achieve its goal of providing universal education for all. India's average literacy rate has improved from 18 per cent in 1951 to 74 per cent in 2011 (census, 2011). In the last 75 years of the country's Independence, the number of primary schools between 1951-52 and 2004-5 has increased by 3.7 times; the number of upper primary and secondary/ higher secondary schools has increased by more than 20 times. The number of colleges for general education expanded by 25 times, while for

professional education, it increased by 15 times. As far as enrolment is concerned, between 1951-52 to 2004-5, it increased to 7 times for the primary level and 17 times for the upper primary level. A massive jump in enrolment rate has been noticed at secondary and upper secondary levels, increasing to 25 times since 1951-52. The overall enrolment in higher education expanded from 1.7 million in 1951-51 to 10.08 million in 2004-5, and the average annual growth rate for higher education was 10.04 per cent (Alam, 2013).

However, the benefits of rapidly expanding educational opportunities did not reach the poor and underprivileged sections of Indian society at different levels of social and regional stratification. Religion is one of the most significant areas of educational deprivations, and Muslims are found to be one of the most educationally deprived socio-religious groups in the last 75 years of India's Independent history (Hasan & Menon, 2004; SCR, 2006; Sharif & Razzak, 2006; Alam, 2007).

India's education system bears the legacy of colonialism and socio-economic disparities, affecting access for various communities. Colonial rule limited educational opportunities, focusing on educating the elite, which reinforced existing inequalities based on class, caste, and religion. (Alam, 2013). Efforts to increase access to education after independence have recorded some remarkable progress. However, disparities still exist, especially in the case of the most deprived populations, such as the Indian Muslims, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Hassan, 2011). Neglecting the educational

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needs of Indian Muslims amounts to the continuation of existing inequalities that hampers the potential of a vast segment of the country's population to contribute to national development and progress (Hassan, 2011). Therefore, understanding and addressing the educational backwardness of Indian Muslims is not merely an issue of social justice; instead, it is necessary to foster inclusive growth and sustainable development (Khan, 2018).

The educational advancement of Indian Muslims is pivotal for promoting inclusive growth and social cohesion in India. One critical initiative in this regard was the Sachar Committee Report, 2006, which gave comprehensive data on the socio-economic status of Muslims in India and recommended targeted interventions for enhancing their educational outcomes. Programs such as the Prime Minister's 15-Point Programme for the Welfare of Minorities intend to enhance educational opportunities for minority communities through scholarships, financial aid, and the establishment of educational institutions in Muslim-majority areas (Basant & Sen, 2012). This paper has been divided into three sections. First, it discusses the status of Muslims' current educational scenario at school and higher education levels. The second part discusses the causes of the educational backwardness of Muslims, the third part discusses the prospects for Muslim education, and finally, the conclusion.

STATUS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION AMONG MUSLIMS

A study conducted by Arun C Mehta on 'The State of Muslim Education in India: A Data-Driven Analysis' shows positive trends in Muslim education. The study shows that a few years earlier, the total percentage of enrolment of Muslim children at the school level was less than the Muslim share (14.23 per cent) in the total population of India, but in 2021-22, Muslim children enrollment from 1-XII grades is almost equal to their population.

Table 1: Percent Share of Muslim Enrolment to Total Enrolment at Different Levels of School Education-2013-14-2021-22

Year	Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Total
2021-22	15.62	14.41	12.61	10.76	14.31
2020-21	15.64	14.26	12.61	10.46	14.26
2019-20	15.38	13.87	12.27	9.89	13.95
2018-19	14.60	13.04	11.49	8.86	13.12
2017-18	14.70	13.11	11.23	9.05	13.25
2016-17	14.99	13.01	10.82	8.66	12.72
2015-16	14.43	12.60	10.24	8.05	12.72
2014-15	14.37	12.60	10.02	8.34	12.73
2013-14	14.34	12.52	9.87	8.27	12.70

Source: Based on UDISE data. As provided in Arun C Mehta's Report on the Status of Muslim Education, 2023.

The study reveals that Muslim students comprise 15.62 at the primary level, 14.42 per cent at the upper primary level, 12.62 per cent at the secondary level and 10.76 per cent at the senior secondary level of the total enrolment in 2021-22. Another positive and encouraging trend is that girls' enrollment at all levels of school education is consistently higher than boys (Mehta, 2023). The following table shows the enrolment rate of Muslim children at different levels of school education between 2013-14 and 2021-22.

The above table shows that initially, the enrolment of Muslim children, as compared to their population share, was lower at 12.70 per cent in 2013-14, but later on, it improved, and in 2021-22, it was 14.31 per cent, which is relatively proportional to their population according to 2011 census. However, the enrolment of Muslim children is not in proportion to their share of the population at secondary and higher secondary levels, but at primary and upper primary levels, it is proportional to their population. Enrolment of Muslim students, particularly at higher secondary levels, is of high concern, which is 9.92 per cent for boys and 11.65 per cent for girls. It is also significant to note that the enrolment of Muslim boys was consistently lower than that of Muslim girls at all levels of school education between 2012-13 and 2021-22 (Mehta, 2023).

THE STATE –SPECIFIC SHARE OF MUSLIM ENROLMENT

As far as enrolment of Muslims at the state level is concerned, in most states, enrolment of Muslim students is higher at the primary level than their share in the total population of the state, but this is not true for the secondary and higher secondary levels of education. In ten states of India, the enrolment of Muslim students at the primary level is higher than their total enrolment at all India levels (15.6 per cent). However, in Jammu and Kashmir, Muslims are 68.3 per cent of the population, but their enrolment primary level is just 64.7 per cent across all levels of education in the year 2021-22.

In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Muslims have the lowest enrolment rates at all levels of education. In nine states of India, Muslims have higher enrolment rates at secondary and higher secondary levels than their enrolment at all India levels. In 21 states, Muslim children have a lower share of enrolment at the secondary level. In 27 states at higher secondary levels, their enrolment is lower than their share in the total population of the state in 2021-22. This shows that Muslim students are facing issues of dropout and lack of transition to higher levels of education.

DISTRIBUTION OF MUSLIM STUDENTS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION

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The Mehta Report 2023 also explains the share of Muslim students' enrolment at primary, upper primary, secondary and higher secondary levels to the total Muslim enrolment from grades I to XII between 2012-13-2021-22. Among the total enrolled Muslim students, 52.02 per cent were enrolled at the primary level, 26.31 per cent were enrolled at the upper primary level, 13.27 per cent were enrolled at the secondary, and only 8.40 were enrolled at the higher secondary level. (Mehta, 2023). The following Table shows the distribution of Muslim enrolment at different levels of school education to their total enrolment.

Table 2: Share of Muslim Enrolment at Different Levels of Education to Total Muslim Enrolment between 2013-14 to 2021-22.

Year	Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Total
2021-22	52.02	26.31	13.27	8.40	100.00
2020-21	52.70	25.93	13.58	7.78	100.00
2019-20	53.49	25.70	13.48	7.33	100.00
2018-19	53.85	25.70	13.51	6.93	100.00
2017-18	54.30	25.91	13.05	6.74	100.00
2016-17	55.71	25.80	12.61	5.88	100.00
2015-16	56.21	25.69	12.09	6.01	100.00
2014-15	56.81	25.64	11.62	5.93	100.00
2013-14	57.82	25.35	11.21	5.62	100.00

Source: Based on UDISE data. As provided in Arun C Mehta's Report on the Status of Muslim Education, 2023.

STATUS OF MUSLIMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Arun C Mehta Report 2023, enrolment of Muslim students in higher education consistently increased between 2016-17-2019-20 from 4.87 to 5.45 per cent. However, in 2020-21, Muslim students enrolled in higher education declined to 19,21,713 from 21,00,860 students and in absolute numbers, there was a decline of 1,79,147 students. Thus, all the growth achieved from 2016-17 onwards was lost in 2020-21 as the Muslim enrolment rate dropped below 2016-17. From 4.87 per cent in 2016-17, it reduced to 4.64 per cent in 2020-21. The following Table shows the enrolment of Muslim students in higher education between 2016-17 and 2020-21

Table 3: Muslim Enrolment in Higher Education-2016-17 to 2020-21

Year	Muslim Enrolment			Total Enrolment			Percentage of Muslim Enrolment to Total Enrolment		
	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both
2020-21	954655	967058	1921713	21237910	20142803	41380713	4.5	4.8	4.64
2019-20	1046374	1054486	2100860	19643747	18892612	38536359	5.33	5.58	5.45
2018-19	993396	965608	1959004	19209888	18189500	37399388	5.17	5.31	5.24
2017-18	939488	898121	1837609	19204675	17437703	36642378	4.89	5.15	5.01
2016-17	916388	822830	1739218	18980595	16725310	35705905	4.83	4.92	4.87

Source: AISHE 2020-21, Ministry of Education, GOI. As provided in Arun C Mehta's Report on the Status of Muslim Education 2023.

GROSS ENROLMENT RATIO (GER) AMONG MUSLIMS AT HIGHER EDUCATION LEVEL

The Gross Enrolment Ratio at the higher education level is measured for students in the age group of (18-23 years). It is an essential indicator for observing the educational status of any community in India. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of Muslims in Higher Education has improved from 8.24 per cent in 2016-17 to 8.91 per cent in the last few years. The highest GER of Muslims was 9.79 per cent in 2019-20 but declined in 2021-22. However, as compared to the national average GER of 27.3 per cent, Muslims are far behind all other socio-religious groups (Mehta, 2023).

A considerable variation has been noticed in the GER of Muslim students across different states of India at higher education levels. The best-performing states in terms of GER of Muslim students when compared to their population in those states are- Kerala (GER-20.35 per cent), Andhra Pradesh (GER-10.12 per cent), Karnataka (GER-15.78 per cent), Telangana (GER-33.55 per cent), Tamil Nadu (27.59 per cent), Maharashtra (10.04 per cent) Utrakhand (12.48 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (GER-6.57 per cent), Punjab (GER-26.92 per cent), Himachal Pradesh (GER-7.2 per cent) Sikkim (GER-10.44 per cent), Meghalaya (GER-12.39 per cent). As far as union territories are concerned, Muslim students' GER is better in Puducherry (GER-25.92 per cent), Andaman and Nicobar Island (GER-14.71 per cent), and Chandigarh GER-(8.63 per cent) as compared to their average population in these states. The states of Assam (GER-6.46 per cent), West Bengal (GER-8.46 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (GER-5.43 per cent), and Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir (GER-12.06 per cent), Lakshadweep (GER-4.32 per cent) which have a significant Muslim population are worst performing states in terms of Muslim students Gross Enrolment Ratio (Mehta, 2023). The following Table shows the Gross enrolment of Muslim students in higher education between 2016-17 and 2020-21.

Table 4: Muslim Gross Enrolment Ratio (Percentage)-2016-17-2020-21

Gender	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Both	8.24	8.66	9.18	9.79	8.91
Male	8.26	8.43	8.87	9.30	8.44
Female	8.22	8.92	9.53	10.34	9.43

Source: AISHE 2020-21, Ministry of Education, GOI. As provided in Arun C Mehta's Report on the Status of Muslim Education 2023.

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR EDUCATIONAL BACKWARDNESS OF MUSLIMS IN INDIA

Education is considered a great equaliser in providing opportunities for social mobility, economic prosperity, and personal development. However, in the diversified tapestry of Indian society, some communities face significant challenges in getting through good quality education and realising their optimum potential. In this regard, Indian Muslims have a very poor socio-economic status that contributes to their educational backwardness. Not one but numerous factors are responsible for the educational backwardness of Indian Muslims, which are discussed in the following section.

EDUCATIONAL BACKWARDNESS AMONG MUSLIMS : HISTORICAL FACTORS

The long-term historical processes and events have shaped the current educational landscape for Muslims in India. Alam's "Education and Exclusion of Muslims" explains how historical factors contributed to educational disparities among Muslims in India. British colonial rule concentrated educational development in specific areas, particularly in the port cities of the presidencies. This uneven distribution of educational investment and growth led to regional disparities in educational opportunities, with some areas benefiting more than others from colonial educational policies (Alam, 2013). The second most important reason was the unwillingness of Indian Muslims to adopt modern English education unless Sir Syed Ahmad Khan started the Aligarh movement and established the Anglo-Mohammedan college at Aligarh. It was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan who, for the first time, tried to bring reform to the Muslim society of the Nineteenth century and convinced Muslims to adopt modern, English and scientific education.

The third factor is the partition of India in 1947, which led to the creation of Pakistan and had significant repercussions for the Muslim community in India. A large segment of the educated middle, professional, and upper classes of Muslims, especially from North India, migrated to Pakistan during the partition. This mass migration depleted the educated strata of the Muslim community in India, leaving behind a population that was predominantly composed of illiterates, artisans, agricultural labourers, and small peasants (Ansari, 1992). The loss of educated individuals and leaders due to partition deprived the Muslim community of role models and catalysts for educational aspirations and progress. (Engineer, 2001, Alam, 2013; Wahab, 2021)

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS AFFECTING MUSLIM EDUCATION

After independence, Muslims' socio-economic and political status deteriorated rapidly as they were gradually pushed onto the periphery of development and progress (Ali, 2021). In present times, the interaction between poverty and economic deprivation stands at the root of the educational backwardness of Indian Muslims (Ansari, 1992). Children often leave school to earn money for their families by working or helping with family businesses. This deprives many Muslim children of education and the chance to acquire skills and knowledge needed for future employment opportunities. (Ansari, 1992; Hassan, 1993).

The educational challenges before Indian Muslims stem from complex social and economic factors requiring comprehensive solutions. By addressing poverty, social exclusion, and educational deprivation, stakeholders can create an environment that empowers Indian Muslims to achieve their educational goals and contribute meaningfully to the nation's development across social, economic, and cultural domains (Hasan, 2011; Razia, 2017)

SYSTEMATIC DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS

Discriminatory practices in several ways, such as overt and subtle forms of exclusion, manifest in the form of limited access to educational resources, differentiated treatment in educational institutions, and systemic biases in employment and higher education opportunities further contribute to the educational backwardness of Muslims in India (Basant, 2007). Following are a few examples of discrimination faced by the Muslim community in its educational pursuits-

1. **Neglect of Urdu Language:** The neglect of Urdu, the mother tongue of many Indian Muslims, in the educational system, particularly as a medium of instruction at the primary level, has alienated the Muslim community, which prefers learning in its native language and has a strong affinity with it. (Ansari, 1992; Farouqui, 2002; Basant, 2007; Khair, 2016).

2. **Discrimination against Educational Institutions:** Educational institutions managed by the Muslim community often face discrimination in terms of financial support, legal recognition, and overall institutional treatment. This unequal treatment hinders the development and functioning of schools, limiting their ability to provide quality education to Muslim students (Ansari, 1992; Khair, 2016).

3. **Culturally Biased School Curricula:** The school curricula in India are often culturally biased, with a disproportionate emphasis on Hindu traditions and mythologies. This bias comes into conflict with the religious values and cultural beliefs of Muslim students, creating a sense of alienation

and discomfort in the educational environment. (Vasif 1989; Ansari, 1992; Basant, 2007)

RELIGIOUS ORTHODOXY

Religious orthodoxy has significantly contributed to the educational and social backwardness of Muslims in India. An emphasis on traditional madrasa education over modern, scientific learning has restricted access to essential academic qualifications and skills, hindering socio-economic progress. Many orthodox leaders prioritise theological education, which often neglects quality instruction in science, mathematics, and modern languages, further perpetuating educational backwardness within the community (Ansari, 1992; Hasan, 1993). Orthodox interpretations of gender roles have often restricted women's access to education, thereby further limiting the overall advancement of the community. To surmount such challenges, modern education must find space in theological teachings, and a balanced approach toward both spiritual and worldly learning should be encouraged. Educational reform that is in tune with contemporary needs yet sensitive to cultural and religious values can bridge this gap inclusively and progressively (Hasan, 1993).

POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE

On the political front, Muslims were being relegated to the fringes and underrepresented, thus not adequately vocal on policy matters, having an impact on the education and development of the Muslim community. Muslims are facing severe political exclusion and marginalisation despite their immense contributions towards the functioning and strengthening of India's democracy. Muslims have had around 4 per cent representation in parliament since Independence, though they comprise 15 per cent of India's population (Rahman, 2023). The problem of underrepresentation of Muslims goes back to partition. Major political parties of India, including Congress, which is accused of 'Minority Appeasement', are hesitant to nominate Muslims, and the reason political parties give is the winnability factor as most of the parties fear that they will lose the support of the majority community if they provide more tickets to Muslims. Thus, the vast underrepresentation of Muslims has also contributed to their socio-economic and educational underrepresentation (Aejaz, 2024).

PROSPECTS FOR MUSLIM EDUCATION

Due to the collective trauma and identity crisis, Indian Muslims have prioritised short-term economic survival over the long-term educational investment, perpetuating educational backwardness. Addressing this issue requires acknowledging the historical impacts of partition on Indian Muslims. Solutions

include providing inclusive educational opportunities, implementing affirmative action, and developing targeted socio-economic and financial aid programs. Recognising the profound effects of partition can lead to effective strategies to bridge educational and economic gaps, fostering a more equitable society.

A comprehensive strategy is needed to address the socio-economic factors behind the educational challenges faced by Indian Muslims. Key initiatives should focus on improving access to quality education through enhanced infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development in Muslim-majority areas. Additionally, affirmative action measures like scholarships, reservation quotas, and outreach programs are essential for promoting educational inclusion and equity for disadvantaged communities. (Khair, 2016; Mehta, 2023).

Furthermore, education among Indian Muslims can be promoted through community efforts and non-governmental organisations. Organisations like All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat and the Aligarh Muslim University Alumni Association are involved in educational advocacy and provide scholarships and other resources to Muslim students (Basant, 2007).

Today, as more families realise the value of education, the participation of Muslims in education has increased. Such targeted interventions catering to the needs of Muslim students would go a long way in enhancing their educational prospects. Programs like remedial coaching, vocational training, and career counselling are thus imperative to address the specific problems faced by Muslim students.

Digital learning and technology integration present significant opportunities for Indian Muslim education. Widespread mobile and internet access enables quality education in remote areas. E-learning platforms offer flexible learning options, addressing social and economic constraints faced by Muslim students. Government and community initiatives, awareness, targeted interventions, and technology adoption are improving educational outcomes. (Shaban, Datta, Fatima, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Key findings reveal that Indian Muslims are educationally backwards because of historical, socio-economic, and cultural reasons, as they have faced consistent barriers in the form of poverty, social discrimination, inadequate services and cultural norms. The implications of these findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and inclusive policies to address educational inequalities. Their poor socio-economic status has exacerbated the exclusion of Indian Muslims from educational opportunities. High poverty and financial constraints

in most Muslim families push children into joining the labour force, which eventually leads to poor performance in education.

Policymakers can empower Indian Muslims and promote social cohesion by prioritizing educational equity and cultural sensitivity. Community and NGO efforts, including scholarships, tutoring, and support services, complement government initiatives by addressing financial and cultural barriers and ensuring resources reach those who need them most.

The educational empowerment of Indian Muslims is not merely a matter of policy and infrastructure but one of creating an ecosystem where every child, regardless of background, gets the chance to learn, grow, and be successful. Therefore, the prospects of educational advancement among Indian Muslims are very bright if the effort is concerted among all stakeholders—government, community organisations, and civil society. With the adoption of inclusive policies, community initiatives and technological interventions, and the addressing of socio-cultural barriers, India can take enormous steps towards the goal of achieving educational equity and universal literacy. In its wake, it will also achieve the broader goals of social justice, economic development, and national progress.

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