

AN OVERVIEW ON THE CONSTRAINTS OF PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG THE MUSLIM WOMEN IN RURAL BENGAL

¹Sahelee De, ²Prof. Sujit Kumar Paul

¹Research Scholar, Research Assistant,

¹Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies

²Department of Lifelong Learning and Extension (REC), Institute of Rural Reconstruction
Visva-Bharati (A Central University), Sriniketan- 731236, Birbhum, West Bengal

Email- ¹saheleede09@gmail.com / skpaulrd@gmail.com

Abstract: Education is regarded as the only apparatus which leads to social, economic, political and cultural development of the individuals, society and nation. It is an instrument of transformation and advancement of the society. In the training and development of human resources, to carry out all the imperative activities, education plays a vital role. Amongst all the religion, Muslim women are the least educated section of the Indian society. The history of Muslim women education can be traced down from Mughal period, British period and post-independence era. During the Mughal period the etiquette families made their women educated. Whereas, during the British period the entire Muslim community specially the women lagged behind educationally. In the post-independence era, the Muslim women made slow but steady progress in education which was considerable. Muslim women are attending school and also few of them pursuing higher education and are earning for their livelihood. But still some barriers strongly exist in our society. The strong desire and enthusiasm have made it possible for their educational advancement. The constitution of India grants the right to Equality and right to Freedom of Religion and Protection of Interests of Minorities in regard to educational right. Still, some among the Muslim women feel that they are deprived of privileges such as education and lags behind in all aspects of life. This paper highlights the constraints of pursuing higher education among the Muslim Women of the Indian Society. The study will be conducted in the District of Birbhum, West Bengal.

Key Words: Higher Education, Muslim Women, Educational Constraints, Women Education.

1. INTRODUCTION:

India is a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic. Liberty, equality and fraternity are the building blocks of our democracy which is enshrined in the preamble of the Indian Constitution. The strength of India lies in the line 'Unity in Diversity'. Right to equality by law and prohibition of discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, religion, gender are the fundamental rights that are clearly envisaged. The Government of India has prioritized welfare, safety, security and development of the minorities. Among the five minorities identified by the Government of India, Muslim community is the one which consists of about 12% of the country's population. The total Muslim population in India is 17.22 crores, according to 2011 census, which is 14.23% of the total population. This makes them the second largest religious group in India after the Hindus and the largest among the minorities. They are minority not only in terms of number but also in terms of position in greater socio-economic and political structure of the country. Prime Minister's High-Level Committee, Government of India (2006) pointed out three types of interrelated issues that the Muslims in India grapple with – Identity, Security and Equity. This makes them backward and underdeveloped as a whole. The committee pointed out that the SC's and ST's were having much lower literacy rate during 1960s than the Muslims, but by 2001 the gap non-existed. In terms of Mean Year of Schooling (MYS), Muslim were having lowest among all categories. MYS was lowest among West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. In West Bengal, Muslims consists of 27% of total population with an absolute population of 2.46 Crore. According to 2011 Census, Muslim in West Bengal had literacy rate of 68.7% compared total literacy of 76.3%.

India is a developing country and education plays a pivotal role in accelerating the process of socio-economic changes. The educational system trains, develops and allocates the manpower system of the country. It is the most important agency that rises social hierarchy of a person. The entire culture, non-material and material both are

transmitted and changed through education from time immemorial. In the developing countries education is considered as a means of modernization. Proper education is essential for the overall development of the minorities. A large section of the minorities still lacks education and to gear them up improvement in literacy levels, enhancing the quality of education and employment generation is crucial.

Women in our country have been discriminated in every sphere of life since the mediaeval period. In modern times women have increased their social status but still a long way to achieve complete equality. As speaking about the Muslim women in India has the lowest status in every sphere of social life. Women belonging to the Muslim community have not been allowed by their men to take part in many spheres of social and economic life. They have been pushed into stereotyped roles of looking after household chores which undermines their capabilities and capacities and the like. Discriminatory attitudes towards the women have led them to illiteracy and are forced to perform the routine duties. Ahsan states that the cause of Muslim backwardness is the juxtaposition of their religion with social life, whereas religion should be a matter of personal faith. This backwardness in the Muslim community affects the development of the women at large than the men. Women plays the most crucial role in upbringing of the children. An educated mother raises her child rationally, directs them to take the right path and plays an effective role in the emotional and physical development. But the backwardness in their religion has discouraged them to accept modern culture and values. In recent times there have been some noticeable changes among the Muslims. They have been adopting modern society and women are found to surmount several barriers. They are now pursuing higher studies so that they can be self-dependent. They have developed consciousness among themselves and are trying to get out of the four walls of their houses. Their age of marriage has also improved as they are not ready to get married at an early age. Education has hence made them aware of their surroundings and help them take their own decisions. They have come across many changes in the matter of education, employment, Purdah, etc. They have acquired greater autonomy in many spheres of social life. But it is important to note that the occurrence of change in urban areas are much more visible than in rural areas. There is a difference in change among the educated and the illiterates. The Sachar Committee report (2006) highlighted on how to remove the impediment those preventing the Indian Muslims from participating in the economic, political and social mainstream of Indian social life. The report revealed the backwardness of the Indian Muslims. It also stated that while the Muslims constitute 14% of the Indian population, they only comprise 2.5% of the Indian bureaucracy. The Committee found that the Muslim community belongs to a much deplorable condition than any other backward classes. Hence, the Committee recommended setting up an Equal Opportunity Commission to provide legal mechanism to address discrimination complaints. To bring about these changes among the Muslim women there have been a lot of struggle and constraints. This paper aims to identify the constraints that a Muslim woman face while pursuing higher education in the rural areas of West Bengal.

2. SIGNIFICANCE AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

Muslim women have to live in fear and authority within their family and outside. Their status in every sphere of life is not satisfactory. They are unable to participate in any kind of decision making. Education can provide sufficient strength for women to claim their rights in economic, political, social and religious domain. It is the only weapon that can eradicate poverty and bring women to the limelight of the society and bring about development towards their way of life. Changes have been noticed in the status of the Muslim women. They have high hopes, ambitious and are eager to be employed. Apart from all these developments some constraints are being noticed in the Muslim community which are pulling them back. This study was conducted to find out these hinderances that hampers the attainment of education among the Muslim women. The present study aims at finding the constraints of Muslim women in pursuing higher education.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The design of the research has been formulated on the basis of nature of the study. The area of the study, the respondents, the tools and techniques of data collection have been decided on the basis of the aims and objectives of the study. The sole purpose of the study is to focus on the insights and experiences of the problem. The research has been conducted on the basis of structural-functionalism. It is purely exploratory research so that problems can be formulated and concepts are clarified. In some cases, diagnostic approach is also incorporated. In depth study has been done over a certain time period to study about the constraints of the women in the Muslim community for pursuing higher education in the rural areas of West Bengal. Data is collected mostly through primary sources and from secondary sources as well. For the purpose of the study, district Birbhum of West Bengal has been selected purposively. Two Muslim dominated villages, Lohagarh and Mohidapur under Bolpur-sriniketan Block have been undertaken for conducting the study. Also, one girls' College (Purnidevi Chowdhury Girls' College) is selected for the purpose of the study. Information was collected from 50 respondents with a division of 10 respondents from the college and 20 from each of the two villages.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:

On the basis of the objective of the study several constraints were found among the Muslim women while pursuing higher education. All the issues are analysed and further discussed on the basis of collected data from the two villages and a college of the Birbhum district of West Bengal. Here the paper replicates the main findings of the study and examines their sociological implications in the context of Muslim women higher education. Of the two villages under study viz. Lohagarh and Mohidapur, the first is an interior village and the second is the road-side village. The Girls' College (Purnidevi Chowdhury Girls' College) is at the heart of the city of Bolpur, Santiniketan.

Table: 1.1 Location wise Distribution of Sample

Respondents' Sample			
Sl. No.	Location	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Lohagarh	20	40
2.	Mohidapur	20	40
3.	Purnidevi College	10	20
	Total	50	100

This table shows the distribution of sample according to their location and area. Out of the total selected samples i.e., 50, 20 belongs to Lohagarh, another 20 from Mohidapur and the rest 10 from Purnidevi College. The two villages showed 40% sample and the college showed 10% sample.

Table 1.2: Educational level of the Respondents

		Educational Level (%)		
		Primary (%)	Secondary (%)	Higher Education (%)
	Lohagarh (20)	90	75	60
	Mohidapur (20)	95	80	75
	Purnidevi College (10)	100	100	90

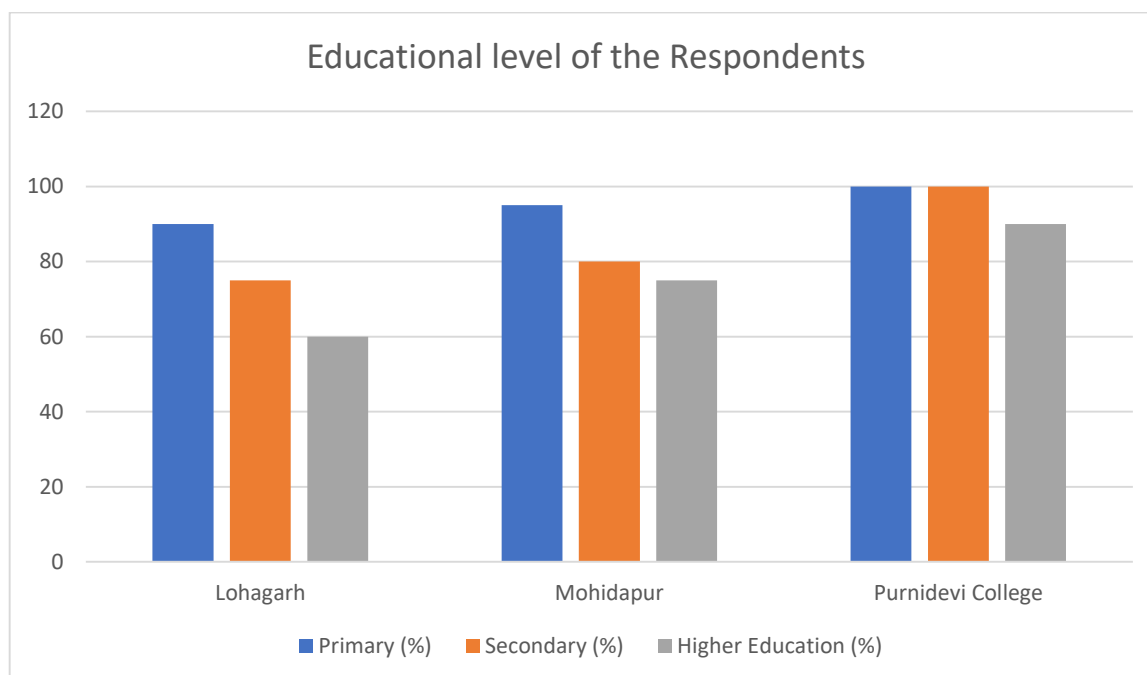


Figure 1: Educational level of the Respondents

This table shows the distribution of the literacy level of the respondents according to the two villages and one college. Considering the two villages it is clearly shown that the enrolment ration decreases with the increase of the educational level. The primary enrolment is significant but secondary and higher education is not impressive among the

40 respondents. The other 90% respondents from the college have shown interest in pursuing further higher studies but still they have some dilemma about their thought. According to the respondents they have to face a lot of hindrances for pursuing higher education. As a result, they are unable to confirm that they could continue their studied further. Some said that they need to earn for their family as a result of economic constraints, others said there is a social pressure for marriage. Among the two villages, Lohagarh is the interior village and there is a noticeable difference among the Muslim women of the two villages about pursuing higher education. The Muslim women of Mohidapur are more inclined to pursue higher education than that of Lohagarh. Education led these women to be more confident and ambitious. Like the women in other religion, Muslim women are also concerned about employability. They are more likely to be independent and are aware of their rights. But still, it is a long and difficult path to achieve what is desired. Majority of the Muslim women themselves are still not aware about their rights and are confined within the four walls of the dominances of family and society. It is important to break these barriers and step forward. Small but steady steps are seen to be taken in the recent times and this is the ray of hope for the overall development of the Muslim women. They themselves are now trying hard to break the hindrances that comes their way while pursuing higher education. Further this paper aims to focus on the constraints of Muslim women while pursuing higher education and represent an in-depth discussion about the hindrances.

5. CONSTRAINTS AMONG MUSLIM WOMEN FOR PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION:

The educational backwardness of the Muslims dates back to the history. The conservatism and anti-British feeling among the Muslims alienated them from the modern education. There were several religio-political movements, during the 18th and 19th century, against the British to resist the inculcation of western culture. As a result of that, the modern education that was started by the British could not reach the Muslims. Being influenced by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan of Delhi (Aligarh), Abdul Latif, Kazi Abdul Bari and Syed Amir Ali of Bengal fought against the conservatism of their Religion and wanted to enhance the educational status of the Muslims. The impact of this was not much among the Muslim masses due to various reasons. After the partition of the country there was also a huge set back in the educational upliftment of the Muslims. The partition made a large chunk of educated Muslims to migrate to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and the masses left behind here lost their zeal for education and entered the path of conservatism. There are other situational, socio-cultural and economic factors that led the Muslims to lag behind their educational attainment. The development of a country occurs when both men and women are equally interested or have the convenience to attain education. In the Islamic view men and women are equal in the pursuit of education and knowledge. But such instances are rarely seen among them. The Muslim women are not at all encouraged to study specially in the field of higher education. We can still see a huge gap among the men and women education. Certain constraints are observed when studied their group intricately and hence some observations are made.

5.1. Social constraints

- **Early Marriage:** In the Muslim community women are married earlier in comparison to any other religion. Female children are treated as a burden in a family with low economic profile. In the developing countries women are forced to get married at an early age without being given any choice to them. They are being married soon after they are teens to secure their virginity and are considered obedient towards their husband and in-laws. They have the misconception of not getting a suitable groom for educated women and fear of higher dowries from the educated and established bachelors. Also, the marrying of a teen girl protects the family's honour and tradition. Although due to religious factors women are married at an early age. The Qur'an permits child marriage. Table 1.3 shows that about 78% of the 50 respondents agreed to the fact that early marriage is a major concern which creates barrier for the women to attain higher education.
- **Social Taboos:** As of other religion, Muslims have taboos too and are considered sinful. A number of social and religious taboos are creating hindrances for women while pursuing education. While quantifying the data, table 1.3 shows that among the 50 respondents about 48% of them could actually find difficulties in pursuing higher education due to various social taboos.
- **Prejudices and Tradition:** it is evident that various prejudices and traditions exists among the Muslim society and these prejudices and traditions are a blockage in the way of pursuing higher education among the Muslim women. Today, the women are trying hard to get rid of these hurdles and create their identity.
- **Purdah:** It is evident that Purdah is not merely a symbol of religious identity, but essentially a symbol of purity and honour. Due to the practice of Purdah women are not allowed to go out in public are confined within the house. As a result, it is seen to impede women's freedom and mobility and also creating a deterrent to access education and employment and 20% of the respondents among the 50 agreed the fact. Also, few women themselves are in the support of purdah system.
- **Lack of Awareness:** About 22% (out of 50 respondents) of the respondents said that people are unaware of the fact that education is the most important factor for the upliftment of the religion as a whole. Muslim women are

significantly lagging behind in every sphere of life. With special mention to education, the lack of awareness is a key factor. The women in Muslim community themselves along with their family members are not aware about the importance of education. As a result, this is a huge gap in their community suffered by the women while pursuing higher education.

- **Less importance on women education:** Women in our country are still dominated and considered as burden in many parts of the country. Unlike the other religious groups, Muslim women are more vulnerable and their education is given the least importance. It is evident from the respondents that they are given less importance regarding education than their brothers by their parents and other family members. Due to certain consciousness and spread of education by the Government and various NGOs a primary level of importance is given on women education but a long way to overcome. Table 1.3 showed that about 10% (among 50) still does not give proper importance on women education.

5.2. Economic Constraints:

- **Family Income:** Economic instability is a major factor in creating hindrances for women education among the Muslim community. Poor family status of the women sets them back from attainment of higher education in spite of their desire. Table 1.4 shows that 32% (among 50 respondents) of the respondents agreed that due to poverty many women's education is provided upto a certain level. Higher education in this scenario is a major setback. The family's conception of costly education becomes a major drawback and they are unable to bear the expenses. Their primary concern is to maintain family expenses rather than allowing their daughter for higher education. In a developing country like India, poverty is a major concern and this creates many other hindrances among the people. Eradication of poverty can solve the problem of illiteracy among the mass and also among the women.
- **Unemployment:** In a country of 139.34 crores (World Bank, United States Census Bureau, 2021) people unemployment is a major problem. Educated people are still not getting job. This concern has a major setback among the Muslim family of the educated women and this creates a barrier for them to attain higher education. Their parents are of the fact that there is no use of education if their daughters are unemployed even after being educated.

5.3. Cultural Constraints:

- **Dowry System:** Still now dowry is largely prevalent in many parts of India. The practice of dowry is inhuman in nature and illegal. Heavy dowry is still in demand while marriage. To avoid this burden of paying dowry Muslim women are married at an early age and they remain illiterate or partly literate. They are unable to complete school education and some are unable to pursue higher education.
- **Prevailing customs, traditions and beliefs:** Like any other religious community, Islam prevails certain customs, beliefs and traditions. While interaction with the Muslim women it is observed that the already existing customs, tradition and beliefs are creating constraints among Muslim women while pursuing higher education.
- **Cultural Taboos:** Certain cultural taboos are prevailing among the Muslim community. These cultural constraints are significant blockages in terms of pursuing higher education among the Muslim women. Their higher ambitions are a positive indicator to overcome these cultural taboos.
- **Psycho-fear of losing Islamic Identity:** For the fear of losing Islamic identity, traditional values, culture and character many Muslim family does not allow their daughters to pursue higher education. They fear that while in schools or colleges their daughter may develop a loving relation with other non-Muslim fellows and might lose their cultural identity. Awareness is the sole remedy to bring them out of such psycho-fear and break the hindrance for acquiring education among the Muslim women.
- **Cultural Orthodoxy:** Cultural orthodoxy is largely prevalent among the Muslim community and they continue to maintain their orthodoxy. This creates a barrier in the field of education and they are lagging behind for this reason. For the same, women are largely affected and they face a lot of hurdles while pursuing higher education.

5.4. Educational Constraints:

- **Inadequate number of colleges:** the lack of sufficient number of colleges are creating a major problem in the attainment of women education among the Muslim community. In the rural areas Muslim women are not allowed to travel far from their house for the purpose of education. Rural areas should have a greater number of colleges for easy access of education. As a result, inadequacy in the number of colleges is a major challenge faced by the women in Muslim families.

- **Co-education:** Most of the respondents' family are found disagreed for co-education. the women in Muslim family are not allowed to study with men due to Purdah system and hence co-ed schools and colleges are rejected by them. All-girls-Schools and colleges are preferred by them for their daughter's education. this creates a major problem in the rural areas for acquiring education. Not all rural areas are privileged with a girl's school or college in their locality.
- **Lack of conducive educational environment:** Many higher educational institutes lack a suitable environment and infrastructure for the women to continue with the education. Lack of bathroom facilities, improper arrangements of sanitary essentials, negligence of teachers, and many such constraints are prevalent in the educational sector creating gap among the Muslim women.
- **Parents' educational consciousness:** Parents lack awareness about the importance of higher education among their daughters. They are more on the verge of getting their daughters married as soon as possible and neglect their studies. They are unaware of the fact that women education is necessary not for their employment but also for better raising-up of their children. The educational level of parents of the Muslim community being extremely low, their level of consciousness is also undermined. As a matter of fact, this pulls back the Muslim women from gaining higher education. Along with these major constraints there are other certain difficulties faced by the Muslim women and hence they are unable to pursue higher education. Some more reasons are inability to overcome competitive examinations required for the admission, lack of coaching centres in the locality, no scholarships for deserving candidates, lack of communication between the educated and uneducated sections of the Muslim community, lack of job opportunities at the cost of education, misinterpretation of Islamic texts about women's education by the religious leaders and so on.
- **Health Related Constraints:** Women suffer from various health related issues and are always not taken to the doctor. They take illness with patience, prayers and meditation. They consider it as a test of God. They try to cure their illness by chanting several prayers which takes a lot of time to cure and sometimes they never cure. Hence, they drop out of school and college for the said reason. Also, menstruation is a major constraint among the Muslim women in pursuing education. they have very little awareness and are not ready to discuss this matter in front of anyone. They are shy, they do not go out of the house while the period is going on, they are absent for 2-3 days due to the said reason. They do not consume pain killers and hence suffer a lot due to period cramps. Level of consciousness should be increased about the proper intake of food while they are on their period, doctor visit and medication are also necessary; actions to be taken so that they can be present at school and break these barriers for the attainment of education. Women become anaemic due to negligence of proper food and medication, as a result they are fatigued and lack energy. Consciousness among the family members is also necessary.

6. SUGGESTIONS:

This study was conducted to find out these hinderances that hampers the attainment of education among the Muslim women. It is aimed to identify the constraints and suggest few preventive measures for the furtherance of the Muslim women. Progression of the situation of Muslim women could be accomplished by raising awareness among the community, enhancing their confidence, raising their status in the family and society, make aware about their rights, boosting their self-esteem, increasing their self-efficacy, reducing their dependency, better up-bringing their children, enhancing their mobility and opening their career opportunities. Here, below are some propositions given to be considered:

- The Muslim Voluntary Organizations should be encouraged to open more educational institutions
- Necessary steps should be taken on the part of the Government to establish more girls' schools and colleges
- Incentives to be given to the economically backward parents so that they can continue their daughter's education
- Children should not be allowed to drop out from school and this should be taken care by the teachers
- Teachers should be more professional about punctuality, regularity and performance
- More employment opportunities so that Muslim women and their families are motivated for pursuing higher education
- More scholarships to be given to the meritorious and economically backward Muslim women
- The Government should put more efforts to establish adult education centres in the villages for women and the teaching should be attractive there
- Initiatives should be taken to open vocational and technical courses in madrasas
- Level of awareness about the importance higher education should be provided
- Effective measurements to be taken for preventing early marriage of the Muslim women

7. CONCLUSION:

The wind of change is blowing strong and sure. Slow but steady progress is noticed among the Muslim women. They are impending out of their age-old seclusion and suppression. Women are the carriers of the future generation and their development is the most crucial part of the emergence of modernization. Even today a lot of constraints are on the path of development of the minority Islam community. They have to surmount barriers that are coming in the way of the Muslims in general and women in particular while pursuing higher education. The Muslim community is reluctant to accept change due their orthodoxy. They have their traditional belief system and a certain way of living. Breaking this barrier is difficult but still some among them are trying hard to adopt modernization. Education is the only key to the success. Despite of so many constraints the positive part among the Muslim women are their ambitious nature and urge to be self-dependent. This ray of hope will bring forward the minority Muslim community and at large the nation in terms of social, economic and political outlook. The consciousness of emancipation of women is the amelioration of any community is to be incorporated repeatedly among them. It is therefore evident that the Government take necessary action for providing modern education among the Muslim women by defrayal of the constraints that prevails largely.

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