



Unequal Gender: Educating Muslim Women Of Manipur

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the educational status of Manipuri Muslim women in a region where the role of women's agency is very strong. It tries to find out whether there is impact of such agency's role on educational attainment and performance of Manipuri Muslim women. The thrust of the paper is the problems in educating Manipuri Muslim women in various aspects of education. The role of Muslim community and the state in their educational growth and advancement are also analysed in this work.

Introduction

Muslim women like women of other communities, are also differentiated across class, caste, community, residence and region. Despite these differences, when compared with others, the majority of Muslim women are among the most disadvantaged, least literate, most economically impoverished and politically marginalized sections of Indian society. Even after 75 years of India's Independence, less than 50% of Muslim women in India are literate. There is not much improvement in their literacy rate, in spite of having right to education, especially at the primary level as an important part of our Constitution. The illiteracy is most widespread in Haryana while Kerala has least illiteracy among Muslim women closely followed by Tamil Nadu. Muslim women are found to be more literate than their Hindu counterparts in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasis factors critical to the status of Muslim women, such as location, class and positive social development. The factors of poverty and patriarchy and of social and economic class are much more significant than religion in determining the status of both Muslim and Hindu women.

Muslim Women and Education in Manipur

Women's high economic participation and their mutual association in the market-place are two factors responsible for the emergence of strong women's agency in Manipur. Unique economic role of Meitei women has its influence and impact on Manipuri Muslim women from time immemorial. It is the distinct historical experience that set apart Manipuri Muslim women from other Muslim women of the country and shaped their significant economic role in the state. Therefore, participation of Manipuri Muslim women in economy is link neither with their educational status nor with cultural norms. With changing time, there is decline of women's role as traders in the market which affect Manipuri Women in general and Manipuri Muslim women in particular. The number of

women-headed households has increased and many are pushed into taking on the economic burden of the family. Manipuri Muslim women's employment has to do with the participation of uneducated women in the labour force. Poorer and uneducated are more likely to be employed. They engaged themselves in various categories of low-profile, informal or unorganized economic activities. Women of other communities took the lead in acquiring modern education, entered new professions in service sector and started progressing. When compared with others, Manipuri Muslim women lagged behind because of educational backwardness.

Due to the revivalist tendencies of Manipuri Muslims in the early part of 20th century, they emphasized mainly on the importance of religious studies. They failed to comprehend the value of modern secular education and thereby ignoring it. Muslims took to modern education as late as the 1970s and that too was limited to few elite groups from Imphal. Muslim women were not educated for a number of reasons: poverty, religious considerations, early marriage and lack of awareness and so there is no option of continuing schooling after marriage. With a population of 8.4 percent, Manipuri Muslims are found in 4 districts of Manipur valley (Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur) and 2 districts of hill areas such as Churachandpur and Chandel. As per the census enumeration of 2011, the literacy rate of Manipuri Muslim women is 55.2 percent which is much below the state's average of 70.3 percent. Out of all the Muslims inhabited districts, Muslim women's literacy rate is found to be highest in Imphal East and Thoubal districts.

Problems in Educating Muslim Women of Manipur

Historically, there has always been a gap between the education of boys and girls in India. In the case of Manipuri Muslims, the gap has been a yawning chasm. Unfortunately, majority of the Muslim students are first generation learners and so they failed to get any help from their illiterate guardians. There has been a higher incidence of drop-out among the children at primary level, particularly those who have illiterate parents. Majority of the Muslims do not consider modern education an important asset for their women. Most of them believe that the women are not going outside to take up jobs, so there is no need to educate them properly. Knowledge beyond primary and religious education for Muslim women is not desirable. Although enrolment of Muslim girls in primary level schooling is equal to that of other community's girls, drop-out rates in middle school for Muslims are higher. As a result, a substantial proportion of them revert to illiteracy within 4-5 years after leaving school. One community-specific factor is the late entry of Muslim girls into school which impinges on the drop-out rate after middle school. This certainly affects the enrolment of Muslim girls in the relevant age group.

The educational status of Muslims in rural areas is in alarming condition. Though all the villages are provided with primary schools, yet the village people are not getting the satisfactory benefits from them due to various reasons. These schools are suffering from inadequate teaching staff, lack of proper school building and insufficiency of teaching aids etc. Most of the primary schools suffer from proper educational atmosphere

and other necessary educational facilities. The breakdown of government village schools typically affects female children more than male children because more girls are in government schools than boys. There is a sharp difference between rural and urban Muslim students in quality of schooling. Most of the Muslim students in rural areas have vernacular language as medium of instruction in educational institutions which make them difficult to compete with students of urban areas studied in educational institutions with English medium of instruction. The available educational facilities in rural areas are not well extended and are fairly well equipped. Thus the villagers are not able to utilize the educational facilities properly for their educational upliftment.

The tendency of the most of poor Muslim parents is to get their children employed at an early age. They desire their child to assist them to supplement their meagre income. The usual growth of educated unemployed also helps generate a negative attitude towards modern education. For poor rural families, madrassas are a compelling option because adequate alternatives are not available. A willingness to bear the cost of children's education, despite poverty, may be high if the quality of schooling is high. Because of ineffective and inefficient functioning of the schools, there is more dependent on private tuitions and coaching institutes as additional learning institutions in urban areas. The high cost of education, especially that of tuition and coaching centres, is a major consideration in decisions made on schooling, especially for Muslim girls. In such cases, only limited few can afford and poor families may not be able to send all their children to school. Ultimately, the result is absenteeism and dropping out. It is important to notice that the family income determine the problem of drop-out and reverted illiteracy of the Muslim children. The occupational structure of the majority of Muslims does not require high levels of education because they are predominantly self-employed. Education is likely to be utilized by those social strata that are oriented to employment in the professions and government services. Among Manipuri Muslims, these strata are very less. The educational and occupational status of the parents has greatly influenced the pattern of enrolment and nature of drop-out among children. The appeal and benefit of education has not reached all sections of the Muslim community. Such differences create a widening gap among Muslim students based on residence and economic status. As a result, the education of Manipuri Muslim women is severely hampered.

The enrolment and retention rate of Manipuri Muslim women in higher education is extremely low. One of the key reasons for the low participation of Muslim women in higher education is their significantly low achievement level in higher secondary attainment rates. The gap between Muslim women and women of other communities become wider and more pronounced when we move upwards i.e. from the lower to the higher levels of education. The maximum percentage of students is found in primary level. Dropout rates were considerably higher at the middle and secondary levels in the case of Muslim women. Even though poor parents perceive the importance of education, many a times they are not able to finance it. That is why, higher education is further denied to the disadvantaged groups and especially women from rural poor homes. Muslims feel that they cannot look upon education as an investment in their future well-being as they

regard their prospects of finding a suitable employment gravely limited. Higher education for young Muslim women was not viewed as an immediate investment in their careers. Since higher education requires a longer investment of time and other resources, preference for young Muslim women is marriage as it is perceived as a priority over higher education. They were also socialized to perceive higher education from that view point. A great number of Muslim girls especially in the rural areas drop out before they reach secondary or higher stages of education. There is also difference in eligible entering higher education between rural and urban areas with latter having more eligible women than the former.

With increasing social demand for a specific kind of professional education (especially skill-oriented degrees) in the post-1991 phase, it is even more difficult for Manipuri Muslim women to compete with others. General education which is mainly preferred by women for higher education is now unable to meet the growing demands of the modern economic development. There is moving away from the general education to the professional courses which lead to jobs and careers. Professional education requires several years of studentship and higher financial investment than the general education. Ultimately, professional education is either denied or almost impossible for the disadvantaged groups and especially Muslim women with poor and rural background. Therefore, Muslim women have very low participation in new professional courses. Few Manipuri Muslim girls from well-to-do and middle class families who are seriously concerned about quality education are now studying outside the state. Out of them, bright and energetic educated girls are pursuing Medicine and Engineering courses from Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bangalore and neighbouring countries like Nepal, China, etc.

Role of Muslim Community and the State in Educating Muslim Women of Manipur

There exist a contrast of opinion between the old and the younger generations in the context of women's education. With change in outlook of people because of the undergoing socialization process, majority of the Muslim youths are aware of the importance and inevitability of education as a tool of change and development. Education of women is now considered as an economic investment at the family level and cornerstone of development at the societal level.

Unsatisfactory economic condition of the Muslims overall, the intense economic competition among the ethnic groups and their standing vis-à-vis the other communities (because their condition has deteriorated and become more pronounced over the years) instilled the Muslims' mind a sense of being 'marginalized' or 'neglected'. Muslims feel that their status is constantly deteriorating in all aspects of life. It is important to see the utilization of educational opportunity by the Muslim community. There is an overall consensus that Muslims lag behind in education, particularly in technical and professional education, and that they have limited job opportunities. With the emergence of educated elite and middle class among the Manipuri Muslims, there are formation of various organizations and entry into politics putting forward the grievances and

demands. Governmental organizations (such as Manipur Wakf Board and Manipur State Minorities Commission) along with bodies like All Manipur Muslims (Meitei Pangal) Welfare Association (AMPWA), All Manipur Muslim Organisations Co-ordinating Committee (AMMOCOC), and All Manipur Muslim Student Organisation (AMMSO) etc. voiced and highlighted the socio-economic and political issues concerning the Muslims in Manipur. They believed in regaining overall problems of Manipuri Muslims with modern education and its values and through government's initiative and intervention.

The role of the state especially in conflict ridden region like Manipur is critical because of the politization on ethnic identity and competition among different groups for state-controlled resources. For a community like Manipuri Muslims, the role of the state is much more crucial for their upliftment and to remove their most backward status. Unlike North Indian Muslims who give priority to religious or cultural demands (like preservation of Muslim Personal Law, Urdu, etc) along with economic demands, Manipuri Muslims are mainly for socio-economic demands with the underlying aspirations for social and economic equality.

One critical issue is the role of the state in the promotion of minority education. The state can make available the scale of investment required for the universalization of education especially for Muslim girls, as their education demand higher investment in terms of more facilities, more women teachers, separate schools, transport and scholarships. As far as higher education is concerned, the best long term measure to correct this deficit is to increase school completion rates among Muslim women. The state must recognize disparities in educational attainment and availability across gender, class, residence and region. Therefore, there is need for comprehensive policy of inclusiveness in the field of education which will reduce disparities of any kind. With overall economic backwardness of the Muslims acting as a massive hindrance in their educational achievement, state's role in economic upliftment is equally important. State's intervention is required in improving economic condition of Muslim women with anti-poverty programmes, increasing credit availability and policies regarding skill up-gradation to engage women workers in growth-oriented sectors.

It is not just governmental efforts that are necessary but a change in traditional and societal norms and in general mindsets of people are equally important. Many of the measures suggested above would become more efficacious if there is community participation. Muslims have to take lead in raising the level of their education for their own well-being. For this, general consciousness and careful planning for the people's participation is required. They must communicate with others for their own needs. Therefore, Muslims must make themselves conscious endeavour to remove this backwardness. The Muslim community themselves should take the lead and work with dedication and sincerity for the upliftment of their own community. The leadership should emerge from within the Muslim society.

Conclusion

Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon argue that to understand Muslim women better, it is important to locate them within the broader context of economic, political and other interests and recognise their “disadvantage, discrimination and disempowerment are experienced at specific and particular intersections of class, caste, gender and community.

The literacy status and levels of education among Manipuri Muslim women is very low. Their situation is indeed very depressing in relative terms. Their deprivation increases manifold as the level of education rises. The expansion of the education among Manipuri Muslim women has been uneven and inadequate. There is both widening and deepening of inequalities among Muslim women on the basis of rich and urban women on one hand, and poor and rural women on other hand. Such inequalities certainly affect the quality education of Manipuri Muslim women.

Today’s Muslim women are aware of the changes and the demands of the time. They want to cope up with the progress and development achieved by their counterparts in other religious groups. They aspire to achieve equal status and empowerment by utilizing the opportunities of education and employment made available to them. While the overall situation remains bad, the enrolment rates of Muslim women have picked up in recent years. Along with recognizing the necessity and the importance of Muslim women’s education, there should be proper attempt to educate them through constructive action. The initiative of the Muslim community and policies and programmes of the state together should help sustain the momentum that can get created through this change.

Education is a unique and long term investment. It is seen as an instrument for the empowerment of women and the foundation of a new and independent selfhood for women. Change in outlook, attitude and values not only help in promoting the education of Muslim women but also in overall advancement of their status. That is why Swami Vivekananda said: “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary.” Therefore, education is the best gift a society can hand over to women.

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