Education and Muslims in India: A Reassessment of the Sachar Committee Report

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Abstract

Education plays an indispensable role for the progress of any country or society. It has the potential to ensure the economic growth of a nation and to eradicate the socio-economic disparities among the citizens of a country. India is characterized by diverse religions and ethnic minorities. Needless to say, for the development of the country, religious minority communities in India must have equal access to and accomplishments in education. However, as per the Sachar Committee Report, 2006 the condition of the Indian Muslims with respect to their status in education is not at all satisfactory. Their performance is poor at almost all levels of education. This paper tries to evaluate the significance as well as the limitations of the report presented specifically about position of the Muslims in India in case of education. This attempt might pave the way in exploring new areas of investigation in future required to assess the problems and demands of the Muslims in developing their status in the field of education.

Keywords: *Sachar Committee Report review on education, Educational Status of Muslims in India, Muslim educational backwardness*.

Introduction

"The Sachar Committee Report was submitted to the Government of India on 17th November, 2006."[1] "It was the first comprehensive report compiled in Independent India in order to intervene and take effective actions by the Government with regard to the prevailing social, economic and educational status of the Muslims in India."[2] Acquisition and advancement of education is a crucial and an integral part for the overall growth of the religious minorities in India. In this respect, proper in-depth assessment of the status of education of the Muslims in India, locating the deficiencies and correspondingly execution of effective Government initiatives according to the need of the beneficiaries are vital for promotion of education among them. It will not only contribute towards ameliorating the social and economic circumstances of the largest minority group in India but shall also maintain the equity and inclusion process in the country. Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to review, thereby

scrutinize and explore the significance and limitations of the Sachar Report in depicting the genuine educational scenario of the Muslim minority in India.

Background

The Indian Government constituted a Top-level Committee on 9th March, 2005. The Committee was chaired by Justice Rajindar Sachar to make a comprehensive report assessing the overall status of the Muslims in India, considering their position in social, economic and educational spheres. "The other members of the Committee included Saiyid Hamid, Dr. T.K. Oommen, M.A. Basith, Dr. Rakesh Basant, Dr. Akhtar Majeed and Dr. Abusaleh Shariff."[3] Government of India planned to make the report in order to formulate and implement "specific interventions, policies and programmes to take account the issues regarding the socio-economic backwardness of the Muslim community."[4] "The Committee submitted its report to the Government of India on 17th November, 2006."[5]

Sachar Committee Report holds, Muslims in India are abysmally backward in education. "They are at a double disadvantage with low levels of education combined with low quality education."[6] "Literacy rate among Muslims in 2001 was far below the national average."[7] Success rates in Graduation among the Muslims were considerably poor in contrast to other Socio-Religious Categories (SRCs) "and the gap is much wider in urban areas for both men and women."[8] The disparity between Muslims and other SRCs aggravates as the Muslims approach more towards higher level of education. Dropout rates among the Muslims are the highest at Primary, Middle and Higher Secondary levels compared to all the SRCs."[9] The Sachar Committee Report undoubtedly is a significant study in terms of revealing the economic, social and educational scenario exclusively about the Muslims of India. In spite of presenting its vital observations and recommendations specifically regarding the educational conditions of the Muslims, there are certain flaws and missing links in the study which otherwise, if considered seriously, would have delivered some other relevant dimensions concerning education of Muslims in India.

Methodology

The main objective of the study is to reassess and analyze the findings and recommendations of Sachar Committee regarding condition of Muslims in the sphere of education in India. Secondary data and viewpoints from various articles, journals and government report have been used to conduct the study.

Predominance of Secondary Data

Sachar Committee came to the conclusions of its study predominantly on the basis of secondary source of data. It stated its remarks and suggestions relating to performance of the Muslims in Literacy, educational attainment, graduation attainment and technical education

mainly depending on the data accumulated from Government and Private organizations. "Census 2001, for the first time provided an important source of data to act on for the committee for measuring educational achievements of different religions, SCs and STs. This was done by using the age profile of persons with different levels of educational achievement."[10] Necessary data from the 61st Round of NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) were also included to elevate the standard of assessment. Apart from quantitative data, "qualitative dimensions of education were analysed through several other data sources like enrolment and attendance rates, the choice of educational institutions such as Government, private or Madrasas and the cost and access to education. It also included data from NSSO, National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Human Development Surveys conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER). Additionally, data from institutions of higher learning such as universities – Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and other technical and professional educational institutions from different parts of the country were used to highlight various dimensions of accessibility to higher levels of education."[11] (SCR 2006: 51-52)

Thus, "the Committee has collected huge amount of data from government departments, the Census, private survey organizations such as NCAER and self-conducted small surveys."[12] It also included tables and technical notes which are presented in about 130 pages. Though bulk of this information holds immense value, its inclusion in one single document does not give a new dimension about Muslims' socioeconomic development. It has just added some quantitative information to the conclusions which have already been inferred in other's studies and researches over the past three decades. (Wilkinson 2007: 832-833). Secondary data are not inevitable for conducting a research. Secondary data are manipulated by human beings and so if a research is conducted exclusively on such kind of data, it may include biases and becomes least reliable. Secondary data are old in nature and they hold scanty information which can be misleading as well. (Kabir 2016: 204) Incorporation of Primary data, that is statistics or quantitative data with regard to enrollment of Muslims at various stages of education as well as In-depth Interview excavating qualitative data regarding perception of the Muslims towards education along with their grievances and demands could have been more pertinent and valuable in assessing thoroughly the performance of the Muslims in education in India.

Non-preference of Madrasa Education

Sachar Committee unfolded significant information relating to non-preference of the Muslims in acquiring education in Madrasas. It had been a widely-held belief that Muslims are inclined towards Madrasa system of education with traditional curriculum since they

prefer more to acquire religious education than modern education. In this regard Sachar Committee's findings have been innovative and striking. "It stated on the basis of the NCAER figures that only about 4 per cent of all Muslim students of the school going age group were enrolled in Madera's. At the all India level it was three per cent of all Muslim children of school going age. (SCR 2006: 77) According to the report, the Government aided Madrasa's are often the last resort for the economically backward Muslims or for those who does not have access to 'mainstream' educational institutions in their locality."[13] However, the Commission prescribed to modernize Madrasa's, and to equip them with "good quality, subsidised 'mainstream' education and develop an adequate infrastructure for education."[14](SCR 2006: 78)

As claimed by the report, many Madera'sas provide education, similar to that provided in 'mainstream' schools. Many of these institutes had shown interest in Government's modernization scheme and were interested "to incorporate science, mathematics and other 'modern/regular' subjects in their curriculum and initiate modern methods of pedagogy."[15] However, the report admits the fact that this 'modernisation scheme' caters to the needs of a small number of children and so cannot be an alternative to mainstream education. Further, the report also points out some lacuna in implementing 'modernisation scheme' in Madrasas. First, there is a dearth of qualified teachers in order to teach modern educational program of studies and those who teach do not get remuneration worth the name. Second, there is ignorance in incorporating modern subjects in the Madrasa curriculum. Third, there is lack of supervision and inspection on the part of the Madrasas and the State in proper implementation of the modern stream. (SCR 2006: 78-79)

Thus, the standpoint of the Commission is quite ambiguous regarding the constructive role of Madrasas in imparting education to Muslim students. Despite the findings about non-preference among the Muslims for Madrasa education and acknowledging that modernisation of Madrasas cannot substitute mainstream education; its suggestion to upgrade the Madrasa system of education becomes ineffective and inconsequential. Following and executing only the madrasa modernization programmes to teach Muslims will deliver vague probability in improving their overall educational condition. The reasons for this are: First, as stated in the Sachar Committee report (pp.77) that only three per cent of "Muslim children of school-going age attend Madrasas."[16] Secondly, certificates issued by Madrasas are not considered by many government institutions for enrolling in higher education. Hence, Madrasa certificates are devalued in the sphere of higher education. Therefore, States should for go the madrasa modernization programmes and prioritize on implementing plans to attract Muslims to mainstream modern educational institutions. (Haneefa 2020: 4-5)

Causes of Educational Backwardness among Muslim women

The Sachar Committee Report stated that "in 2001, literacy rate of Muslim women was 50

per cent"[17], which was at par "with women of other communities and were much better than SC/ST women in rural India. However, as per State level estimates, the literacy gap between Muslims and the general average is greater in urban areas and for women"[18] though it added that in Tamil Nadu status of Muslims was "better in all sub-groups and in Kerala differences across SRCs were minimal."[19] (SCR 2006: 53)

Therefore, it is quite evident from the overall performance of the Muslims in general that though, literacy level of the Muslim females was not satisfactory but their performance in literacy might have differed from region to region and from one state to another. The explanations of such variations which the Committee has surpassed could have provided better insights into the Muslim female educational status on the basis of region (rural-urban) and State. According to the Committee, generalised discrimination and lack of access due to poverty are the main reasons behind this. But this seems to be a partial explanation. In some western and southern states the educational condition of the Muslims is quite better than the usual and the rest of the country. Although the "Muslim literacy rates are below the Indian average, the report itself states that performance of the Muslims in education in 10 out of 21 states studied (including Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka) is better than the average."[20] (SCR 2006: 53). Thus, it is evident that Muslims' access to socioeconomic rewards is State or region oriented. (Wilkinson 2007: 835)

Moving on to the Higher Education, Sachar Committee Report states, the attainment of Graduation among the Muslims "is less than half compared to 'All Others' and the gap is much more prominent in urban areas for both men and women. This disparity, between Muslims and 'All Others' have widened since 1970s over time and the overall progress has been poor both in urban and rural areas, especially among women."[21] (SCR 2006: 67).

The Committee thus pointed out the poor performance of Muslims at higher stages of education, especially among the female members of the community. But having said that and even revealing the dismal educational conditions of Muslim females at higher levels of learning, it did not provide the relevant causes and constructive solutions relating to the meager accomplishment of Graduation among the Muslim women. Based on interactions with the Muslim Community, the Committee mentioned certain factors responsible for the plight of Muslim female education. According to the Committee, reluctance of Muslim parents in educating girls, early marriage, "non-availability of schools within easy reach for girls at lower levels of education, absence of girls' hostels, absence of female teachers and availability of scholarships as they proceed towards higher education are the causes behind Muslim female backwardness."[22] (SCR 2006: 85) The causes which have been stated in the report for the higher dropout rate among Muslim girls were quite partial and superficial in relevance to exploring the genuine problems in this regard. Although majority of the analysis of the report is centered on education, it did not mention the factors responsible for inaccessibility

of "Muslim children, especially Muslim girls to primary, secondary and higher education."[23](Wilkinson 2007: 835)

An in depth interview with the Muslim girls and their parents may help in probing and scrutinizing the real causes behind underrepresentation of Muslim females in higher education. Social norms may prevent Muslim girls to attend any educational institution. It may also be a reason of dropout which consequently widens the gender disparity among the Muslims in case of education. Again, because of the constraints imposed by Muslim families (Tyrer & Ahmad 2006) and lack of safety for the girls in rural and urban slums, Muslim parents restrict their daughters to go outside. This often becomes an obstacle for the girls to attend schools (especially when they reach their puberty) or acquire higher education. Purdah system, the practice of polygamy and one-sided divorce or separation in the community, reluctance in educating girls (since highly educated girls are less approved by the grooms) may be some of the important factors for "meager participation of Muslim females in education. The findings from several studies '(Baruah & Goswami 2012; Borooah & Iyer 2005; Duraisamy 2000; Gouda & Sekher 2014; Hunt 2008; Mugisha 2006; Narula 2014; Pal 2004)' divulged that parental education, parental attitude, household income, family size, place of residence, etc. are also the significant and decisive factors for the children to acquire education in Muslim families."[24] (Sengupta and Rooj 2018: 90)

Education of the female members furnishes the foundation and impetus for the progress and expansion of education among both the genders of any community. Increase in literacy rate and educational advancement of Muslim women is a crucial step in this regard for overall socio-economic development of the community as well. As stated by Haneefa that lack of female literacy is the main cause for the educational backwardness of Muslims and he supported his argument by quoting Robin Jeffrey from his work on Kerala (1992), "literate men have literate sons; literate women have literate children" which emphasized on the significance of literacy of the females in accomplishing literacy for large number of people in Kerala. Thus, according to him, female literacy is necessary to attain mass literacy. He also added that it also becomes an advantage for the families in contributing towards increasing educational achievements. (Haneefa 2020: 5)

Urdu as medium of education

Referring to the issue of Urdu language as medium of education, the findings of the Committee is noteworthy. It claimed that "non-availability of education in Urdu language is one of the factors for the low educational status of Muslims in India."[25] The report reaffirms that there had been more violation than adherence to the provisions of the Constitution of India including Article 350A in providing "adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups."[26] The Report added that despite the positive recommendations of various Committees (Gujral Committee, Ale

Ahmed Suroor Committee, Ali Sardar Jafri Committee) in 1975, 1983, 1990 respectively, which was constructed by the Central Government for the advancement of Urdu language in India, there is dearth of Urdu medium schools in most States with low enrolment of children. State wise data revealed except Maharashtra and Karnataka, no other States could show satisfactory enrollment of Muslim children within the age span six and fourteen years. The report claimed that inadequate facilities to learn in Urdu is the main cause for low enrollment and poor performance of Urdu Medium students. (SCR 2006: 80-83) Education in mother tongue specially in primary schools improves learning outcomes easily and increase comprehensive skills. Non availability of Urdu medium schools with adequate infrastructural facilities in majority of the States (irrespective of Muslim population density) in India as elucidated by the Sachar Committee is surely a great concern and setback in imparting proper primary education to Muslim children.

Considering "the large proportion of Muslim children having Urdu as their mother tongue, the report stressed on teaching Urdu as an elective subject, in areas which have a substantial Urdu speaking population."[27] However, besides this, it proposed Urdu medium schooling at the higher level of education up till graduation to enhance their employment possibilities. (SCR 2006: 83) Urdu being the mother tongue of Muslim children undisputedly enables them in acquisition of knowledge with ease. But would it be a necessary and constructive step in incorporating Urdu at higher levels of education to enhance employment prospects for the Muslims in contemporary society? A study conducted in Maharashtra provides a different outcome in this regard. It stated that in spite of the State's support towards Urdu medium schools in imparting primary education to the children in mother tongue to attain the constitutional obligation, the employment prospects of Urdu medium children has been found to be dismal. Their performance often drops because the lessons are taught in English medium of instruction at higher stages of education. Since about 95 per cent of children "in Urdu medium schools in Maharashtra belong to economically backward religious minority"[28], it creates a negative impact on Muslims' participation in private and public sector employment as well. (Shaban 2015: 46)

Thus, it is quite comprehensible and coherent that though Urdu as mother tongue can be a useful tool for Muslim children in grasping and strengthening basic knowledge at primary level of education, its effectiveness at higher levels of education in increasing potential abilities in order to procure good employment remains entirely dicey and futile. Therefore, alternate inclusion of effective changes in medium of instruction at higher levels of education would be more pragmatic and rational in approach in building up the future of the Muslim children in a better way. It should be made certain that along with the medium of instruction in native tongue or first language at elementary level of education, English as universally accepted medium should also be incorporated step-by-step in the curriculum. This approach ultimately will be more practical and would cater to the modern economic demands. (Khan 2016: 5)

Recommendations of the Committee

Considering the educational deficiency observed among the Muslims" their low levels of enrollment to their meager "participation in higher levels of education"[29], specially the dismal condition of the Muslim women in this regard, the Sachar Committee recommends certain initiatives in yielding positive outcomes of the Muslims in the field of education. "The Committee stated that it is the responsibility of the State to provide free and compulsory education to children up to the age of 14"[30] and this "is critical for the improvement of the educational conditions of Muslims."[31] The initiative to set up exclusive girls' schools for nine-twelve standard students was proposed in the report to engender "higher participation of Muslim girls in school education."[32] Besides this, the Committee emphasized on offering primary education in Urdu in upgraded Urdu medium schools specially in the Urdu speaking population concentrated zones, to cater to the requirement of Urdu speaking children. With respect to Madrasas, it has been prescribed that they should be associated with a "higher secondary school board to enable and facilitate the students to shift to mainstream education"[33] after completing the course from Madrasa. Additionally, the Committee urged for acknowledging the degrees of the Madrasas for fulfilling the eligibility criteria in competitive examinations. In offering the remedial measures for mitigating the problem of scarcity in higher educational achievements among the Muslims, the Committee proposed to evolve alternative criteria for admission "in the regular universities and autonomous colleges"[34] in order to provide facilities to the "most backward" among all the Socio-Religious Categories. The Committee emphasized that this should help the poor among all communities. (SCR: 243-248)

The attempt and feasibility relating to policy initiatives of Sachar Committee for the improvement of the educational conditions of the Muslims, appears to be trivial and partial. The narrow and superficial guidelines have been formulated disregarding the necessities and demands of the Muslims as a socio-economically heterogeneous community. The Committee has been passive in conceiving and advocating any remedial strategies for the financially deprived Muslim students, to ameliorate the educational status of Muslim girls and boys at higher education level and in framing any policy exclusively for the benefit of the Muslim students in pursuing their studies in educational institutions. The suggestions put forwarded by the Ranganath Misra Commission in this regard are quite significant with possibilities in uplifting the educational conditions of the Muslims to a great extent. The Commission strongly recommended "at least 15 per cent seats in all non-minority educational institutions earmarked for the minorities, 10 per cent for the Muslims and the remaining five per cent for other minorities."[35] Moreover, since Muslim women are educationally backward, concessions with regard to "lower eligibility criteria for admission and lower rate of fee"[36] including other possible measures were also prescribed for them for their educational advancement. Enhanced aid was recommended for the schools and colleges run by the

Muslims as well as for the Madarsa Modernization Scheme of the Government to raise the standard of education for them. (RMCR 2007: 150-151)

It is also dispiriting that even after revealing the deplorable condition of the Muslims in education, Sachar Committee remained dormant in prescribing any development scheme or scholarship programme for the meritorious but financially deficient Muslim students which otherwise would have been immensely beneficial for preventing dropouts and in supporting the continuation of studies (including higher education) among the Muslims. There are certain scholarship schemes run by Ministry of Minority Affairs for the upliftment of minorities but they are not exclusively designed for the Muslims as beneficiaries, even though they need the most considering their depressing socio economic development. The schemes have been designed for all the minority communities disregarding their differences. Such an initiative is complicated because some minorities are in a more disadvantaged position than the others and thus they cannot compete with those who are in a better position and get the benefits from such schemes. The assembling of all the different minority communities under one roof and targeting them as one kind of beneficiaries is like the equal treatment of unequals. (Khan 2016: 5-6)

Conclusion

Muslims occupy the second position among all the religious communities in India and they are the most populous among all the minority groupings. Even after 75 years of independence, Muslims in India have remained backward in almost all socio-economic indicators. One of the main factors behind the overall regression among the Muslims is their persisting grievous achievements in the field of education. An in-depth study with quantitative as well as qualitative primary data incorporating viewpoint, needs and demands of the Muslims related to education is vehemently required in order to draw the attention of the Government in ameliorating the educational status of the Muslims. Though they are advancing towards assimilating with the mainstream modern education in a slow pace, it is to be encouraged with more effective and pragmatic measures so that they can move ahead concurrently with the trends of modern society. Further, Muslims being a heterogeneous community, encounter different educational problems due to poverty, gender, caste and regional disparities. Therefore, Government should not only delve into relevant data on these issues but should also consider the causes behind such problems before planning any development strategy or policy intervention for the education of Muslims. Sincere and proper initiatives of the Government oriented in the direction of uplifting the condition of education of the Muslims, depending on authentic and reliable data will not only pave the way towards their progress in education, but it shall also aid in enriching the socio-economic circumstances of the Muslims altogether.

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