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## Current State of Muslims in India

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### ABSTRACT

While the level of education all through India is still below the universally acceptable standards, the educational status of Muslims in particular is of grave concern. Statistics irrefutably demonstrate that, on an average, Muslim men and women are far less accomplished than their non-Muslim counterparts on the educational front, and this is so across almost every state in India.<sup>1</sup> The community has progressed at a pace more gradual than the any other Socio Religious Community. In several aspects they have even been over taken by the traditionally under privileged SC/STs. Against such a backdrop, the present paper analyses the factors responsible for the educational backwardness of the country's largest minority. It seeks to explain why the task of bringing the community at par with the majority as well as other minorities remains largely unaccomplished despite state intervention. Further, it proposes ways to address the problems faced by the minority both through existing mechanisms and by establishing new ones

**Keywords:** Muslims, Education, Right to Education, Affirmative Action, Equal Opportunity

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### INTRODUCTION

No country can boast of development if its sizeable minority is steeped in illiteracy, poverty and backwardness. Muslims share a significant space in India's population. They account for 14.23 per cent of the country's people and are the second largest denomination after the Hindus.<sup>2</sup> Despite, their considerable presence they are pretty much at the bottom of most socio-economic indices. Their living conditions are comparable, and on some parameters, even worse than other backward categories such as Scheduled Castes, the incidence of poverty is high within the community, and literacy levels abysmally low. By and large the community lags behind most others in terms of access to public and private sector jobs, infrastructure and credit.<sup>3</sup>

The rapid economic growth of the country in the past decades has had little meaning for them, neither have they been able to contribute to it effectively, nor have they benefited from it significantly. And that is essentially because of low levels of education amongst the community. More than half of the total Muslim Indian Population i.e., 53.95 per cent is illiterate with 17.48 per cent only so for namesake. Only 21.18 per cent people have completed their primary education while the percent share of secondary literates among the Muslims is only 7.44 per cent. The Muslims with technical and non-technical diploma courses are only 0.19 per cent and in the higher studies their share is only 1.728 per cent. NSSO, in its report titled "Education in India, 2007-08: Participation and Expenditure", says that of 100 Muslims in the education system, just 10 are enrolled in high school and above.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Muslim\\_Statistics\\_-\\_Education\\_and\\_Employment#India](https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Muslim_Statistics_-_Education_and_Employment#India)

<sup>2</sup> 2011 Government of India Census

<sup>3</sup>2005 Sachar Committee Report

A well-educated population equipped with skills and knowledge is not only essential to support economic growth, but also a precondition for growth to be inclusive because it is the educated and skilled who benefit most from employment opportunities.” Therefore addressing the backwardness of Muslims on the educational front is vital for their social transformation and economic amelioration.

### SACHAR COMMITTEE

While most problems of the Muslim community had been common knowledge, a systematic study of the grievances was needed and the Sachar Committee set up in 2005 was a great step in that direction. The committee was set to analyse the conditions of Muslims in India and ameliorate their socio economic and educational conditions. It was the first of its kind to bring Muslim backwardness to national importance and spark off a discussion that is still on going. It highlighted and suggested how to remove the impediments that have prevented Indian Muslims from fully participating in the economic, political and social mainstream.

The findings of the Committee on the fundamental issue of education revealed that the literacy rate of the community was far below the national average. When compared to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe their growth in literacy was much lower. According to Sachar Committee 25 per cent of Muslim Children in the 6-14 age group either never went to school or else dropped out at some stage.

The Committee report was instrumental in clearing the popularly held misconception that the Muslims have been unable to acquire modern education due to their preference for Madrassas. Amidst the widespread discussion about the role of madrassas in the the life of muslims, the findings revealed that only about 3 per cent of Muslim children actually go to madrassas.

The Committee also found that Muslim parents are not averse to mainstream education or to sending their children to affordable Government schools. Instead the access to government schools for Muslim children is the impeding factor. The association between Muslim population and the availability of educational infrastructure in small villages was observed to be inversely proportionate.

Another factor highlighted by the Committee for low attainment of education amongst Muslims was the dearth of facilities for teaching Urdu and other subjects through the medium of Urdu in lower classes.

Besides lack of adequate educational facilities the other reason for low enrolment rates within the community as highlighted by the Sachar committee report was the lack of perceived returns from education. Simply put, a majority of Muslims feel that getting an education was no guarantee of improving their livelihood because eventually they will be discriminated against and the only option they have left is to get self-employed in small businesses. While educated unemployment is pan India problem it is even more so in case of the Muslim community. In urban India, close to half the Muslims (46 per cent) still depend on self-employment for livelihood. Despite obtaining degrees and certificates Muslims have been unable to get employment, especially in the Government and organized sector. Professor Abusaleh Shariff, of Centre for Research and Debates in Development policy, New Delhi and a visiting scholar to US India Policy Institute in Washington DC, also attributes discrimination to the plight of Indian Muslims. “They [Muslims] do not get jobs [corresponding to the] qualifications, both due of market imperfections and also due to bias in the system,” he said. Even in rural area, they do not even get employment under the [government’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Act project].”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.ibtimes.com/surprise-surprise-muslims-are-indias-poorest-worst-educated-religious-group-1392849>

Besides identifying the various factors for relative deprivation of Muslims in India, the Sachar Committee also made recommendations to address the problem. Fifteen of the recommendations were in regards to education, the aspect emphasized as the most important by the committee. Some of which were:

- To Focus specifically on improving the access to education of Muslim girls.
- Outreach of upper primary schools, particularly for Muslim girls, will be expanded with “girls only” schools, wherever required, and by opening residential Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) schools, on priority, in areas with substantial Muslim population.
- In pursuance of the goal of universalizing secondary education, priority was to be given to opening of secondary/ senior secondary schools in areas of Muslim concentration, wherever there was a need for such schools.
- A mass mobilization campaign was to be carried out in all districts, having a substantial population of Muslims, to generate awareness about the need for literacy and elementary education and to promote vocational education and skill development.
- In areas with a concentration of Muslim population, Block Institutes of Teacher Education (BITEs) were to be established to impart pre-service and in-service training to primary, upper primary and secondary level teachers.
- The Area Intensive and Madarsa Modernization Programme was to be augmented and the scheme revised to enhance the components eligible for assistance under this programme.
- Existing school and community buildings were to be used in the evenings as ‘study centres’ where existing teachers could be engaged on honoraria to tutor willing students including girls, who could be accompanied by guardians.
- Text book were to be revised in accordance with the National Curriculum Framework-2005 which envisaged the strengthening of a national system of education in a pluralistic society, based on the values enshrined in the Constitution of India, such as social justice, equality and secularism.<sup>5</sup>

The implementation of these recommendations could have gone a long way in addressing the backwardness of Muslims in the sphere of education. However, unfortunately the Sachar Committee report became target of various allegations and accusations. The main one being that it was neither constitutional nor statutory as it had not taken into consideration other religious communities, i.e. Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists and Parsis. It was labelled as ‘communal’ for focusing only on deprivation amongst Muslims. At the time the central government took no heed to such scepticism, and through a press release on 21-February-2014 announced that it had accepted 72 recommendations out of the 76 recommendations listed from the Sachar Committee Report. Eventually, however it gave into the pressure.

## CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Now, over a decade later, it is appropriate to ask what has changed with regards to the Muslims of India since the the submission of the Sachar Report. Regrettably, there has been no perceptible improvement. The Muslim minority continues to lag behind all other socio religious communities in the sphere of education and social growth.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://minorityaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/15PP-SacharCommitteeStatus\\_0.pdf](http://minorityaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/15PP-SacharCommitteeStatus_0.pdf)

The 2011 Census revealed that Muslims have the highest number of illiterates in the country -nearly 43 percent of their population - while Jains have the highest number of literates among India's religious communities with over 86 per cent of them being educated. It isn't surprising that illiteracy level within the Muslim community is even above the national average.

Furthermore, with regard to higher education, a draft report based on the National Sample Survey 2009-10 showed that only eleven out of hundred Muslims in India take up higher education- lowest amongst all religious groups. According to the 2011 Census 2.76 per cent of Muslim are educated till graduation level or beyond. The 2014-15 All India Survey on Higher Education shows that Muslims comprise 14 per cent of India's population but account for only 4.4 per cent students enrolled in higher education.

With backwardness of Muslims remaining as bad as it was in 2006, when the Rajinder Sachar Report was published, it is clear that government interventions have failed to match the scale of marginalisation within the community. This has been so mainly because the recommendations of the committee were opposed on grounds of being ‘communal’ and a means of ‘minority appeasement’, thus preventing their implementation. Politicization of the issue aside, the reality remains that there is an urgent need to address the stagnation of the community. The remedy for the travails of the Muslim community can be found largely through bolder initiatives in the field of education that would empower them as nothing else would. And there exists wide scope within the Right to Education Act in this regard.

## **RIGHT TO EDUCATION**

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act passed by the parliament of 4<sup>th</sup> August 2009 may not have been aimed at any community in particular, however if implemented in its true spirit it is bound to remediate the condition of the Muslim minority in India. The Act seeks to achieve Universal Elementary Education – a goal that remains unrealised as long as educational exclusion of a certain community is not addressed. The deprivation of elementary education has consequences that not only impact a particular excluded group for a year or so, instead it effects generations after generation as it leads to deprivation of higher education and eventually employment.

Therefore, it is imperative that proper strategies are chalked out within the ambit of Right to Education to include Muslim children in the mainstream for they are at the lowest in hierarchy of all indicators related to Universal Elementary Education.

As pointed out previously one of the main reasons for low attainment of Muslims in education is the limited access to schools and lack of quality educational facilities in areas with a concentration of Muslim population. This hurdle can easily be removed if the government fulfils its duty under the Section 6 of the RTE which lays that the appropriate Government and the local authority shall establish, within such area or limits of neighbourhood, as may be prescribed, a school, where it is not so established.

Another problem with the present education system that contributes to low presence of the minority community in schools is that school syllabi and prescribed course books are replete with matters pertaining to the faiths of the majority community and mythological stories of gods and goddesses. Such teachings are in collision with the ideals and beliefs held by Muslims as a result they often consider education as a negation of their own faith and choose to distance themselves from it. It is important that school curriculums as prescribed by the Section 29 of the Right to Education Act must be in conformity with the values enshrined in the Constitution. Secularism being one such core value,

it must be ensured that religious texts are not allowed to creep into school texts books, as it has alienating effect on children from other communities. Religion should be best left for parents and guardians to teach in the confines of their own homes.

Further education particularly primary education must be imparted in the mother tongue as it undisputedly enables the child to understand and apply skills more easily. The Section 29 (2) (f) of the Right to Education Act provides that the medium of instructions shall, as far as practicable, be in child's mother tongue. While Urdu was never a primarily Muslim language it has emerged as the mother tongue of most Muslims in the Indo-Gangetic plains, surprisingly it is also reported to be the mother tongue of a sizeable section of the populations of Karnataka (10%), Maharashtra (7.5%) and Andhra Pradesh (8.5%).<sup>6</sup> Despite this there are very limited facilities for teaching Urdu and other subjects through the medium of Urdu in lower classes, and this is another major factor for low level of education amongst Muslims in India. As a result of its politicisation and identification with the Muslim community, the development of Urdu, which was predominantly used in public life before independence, has been relegated to the background with the most visible area of neglect being schooling and education. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure the revival of the language, and most importantly establish facilities to teach in Urdu in compliance with its duty under Section 29(2)(f).

Additionally, it must also be ensured, that while using the mother tongue as medium of instruction at the initial stage, the curriculum should be developed in a way that it gradually moves onto a universally accepted medium such as English, so that individuals are able to eventually meet the demands of the modern economy and are not disenchanted by its realities.

### **EQUALITY WHERE NONE IS REQUIRED**

The Ministry of Minority Affairs was carved out of Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment and created on 29th January, 2006 to ensure a more focused approach towards issues relating to the notified minority communities namely Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Sikhs, Parsis and Jain. The mandate of the Ministry includes formulation of overall policy and planning, coordination, evaluation and review of the regulatory framework and development programmes for the benefit of the minority communities.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the schemes run by Ministry of Minority Affairs for the upliftment of minorities include

- I. Pre-Matric Scholarship for Students Belonging to the Minority Communities
- II. Post-Matric Scholarship for Students Belonging to the Minority Communities
- III. Free Coaching and Allied Scheme for the Candidates Belonging to Minority Communities
- IV. Merit-Cum-Means Scholarship Scheme for Minority Communities Students
- V. Maulana Azad National Fellowship for Minority Students<sup>8</sup>

A perusal of these schemes shows that none of them deal specifically with the Muslim minority, in spite of them lagging behind others on all indicators of socio economic development.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://parisar.wordpress.com/2007/01/25/sachar-committee-on-education/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/about-ministry>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.zakatindia.org/images/Schemes%20for%20Minorities+RTI%20Techniques.pdf>

Instead all minority communities have been put within one bracket and have been targeted as a whole. Such an approach is problematic because even within the minorities there are certain communities that are more disadvantaged than the others. As a result they are unable to compete with the better placed ones, and reap benefits of such schemes. This clubbing together of the different minority communities and treating them as one, is the equal treatment of unequals. And as Thomas Jefferson rightly put it there can be nothing more “unequal than the equal treatment of unequals.”

### **AFFIRMATIVE ACTION**

Affirmative action has been at the core of public policies towards the socially disadvantaged all around the world and there is no denying that Muslims constitute a socially disadvantage group in India. If the Indian State is live up to its core constitutional values of justice, fraternity and equality it must provide preferential treatment to include this minority in the national mainstream.

Affirmative Action for Muslims need not be limited to the quota system but can also include mechanism wherein equal opportunity is given to people especially in the fields of education and employment.

### **EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AS A SOLUTION?**

In the decades that have followed independence, the government has implemented and assured accessibility to programmes that promote literacy, education and skills for all. Yet certain communities continue to be relatively deprived in the socio-economic and educational sphere, and remain excluded from the public space. An empirical analysis by the Sachar Committee of indicators of literacy, higher education and formal employment according to religious communities, confirms the placement of Muslims below the line of average. In some of the measures, they are even found lower than the SC/STs. Such data shows that accessibility of programmes and policies of national and state level has not been even. While in a country as diverse as India differentials in social and economic outcomes are inevitable to some extent, large disparities in achievement levels suggests the systematic failure of governance and exiting structures. It is of utmost importance to establish an independent institution that enables equal opportunity of access to government programmes and services, as recommended by the Sachar committee in 2006. The Committee proposed establishment of an Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) to ensure opportunity of ‘access and use’ equally and justly. This recommendation was made after considerable deliberation to provide a ‘level playing field’ to all socio-religious communities. It is the need of the hour to bring back this demand made by the Sachar committee if deprivation of minorities particularly Muslims has to be addressed effectively.

### **CONCLUSION**

The continued backwardness of a portion of population as large as one-seventh is a constant drag on the entire nation’s resources. It is neither good for the country’s social stability nor does it make economic sense.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it is also goes against the constitutional principles of social justice, equity and equal opportunities for development of all. Therefore it is important that upliftment of Muslims is taken up seriously by the India State. A systematic and focused approach must be adopted to ensure their inclusion in the educational mainstream. In doing so it must also be recognised that there is a need to plan exclusive interventions targeted at the community so that benefits of various schemes actually trickle down to them.



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