

Issues in Education Among the Muslims of Delhi

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Delhi has a literacy rate of 81.7% and Muslims in Delhi have literacy around 66.6% shows 2001 census. The present paper is based on the fieldwork done in the Muslim majority areas of Delhi -Old Delhi (Turkman Gate, Bara Hindu Rao), Okhla (Zakir Nagar, Abul Fazal Enclave), Seelampur and Usmanpur. It is an attempt to explore the factors affecting the state of education of Muslims in the national capital. There are various reasons for it, but few factors which were prominent have been explained in detail, like Settlement Patterns, Segregation and Social Composition, Caste and class factors, the karkhana business, Boy vs. Girl, the language factor, Government vs. Private vs. Madarsa, and women. It is based on interviews, case studies and observations in these areas of Delhi. The paper also tries to understand the various dynamics present in these localities, their differences and homogenous factors binding them apart from their religious identity. The opinions of respondents also explain their differing attitude towards education in these areas, but everyone across all areas wants more government schools in their areas.

Education is one of the basic criteria on which the progress of a community can be measured in today's world. To stress the importance of education in Islam, Islamists often quote Prophet Muhammad who had said that if in search of knowledge, one has to go to China (implying the difficulties in the process) one should. Following this, Muslims should have been educationally very advanced, but, statistics show a different picture. Among the major religious communities of India, Muslims are the most backward as shown by Sachar Committee Report as well.

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This article¹ is an effort to try and explore the factors which affect the education of Muslims in Delhi. It is based on the fieldwork done in the Muslim majority areas of Delhi. There are various reasons for it, but some factors which were prominent have been explained in detail. Delhi's Muslim majority areas can not be seen as homogenous as they differ on various counts like historical background, social composition (caste and class), etc. and Delhi being the national capital is not as backward as areas of W. Bengal or Bihar.² The 2001 census puts literacy rate of India at 64.8% and Muslims at 59.1%, where Delhi has a literacy rate of 81.7% and Muslims in Delhi have literacy around 66.6%.³ This shows how far Muslims lag behind in the success story of the capital city. Although, things are changing today, since a lot has been done through programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, etc. but still a lot remains to be done.

The best part of field work is that it gives an insight and access to a lot of aspects of family, and other areas of social life directly and indirectly. During the survey in these Muslim majority areas a few patterns emerged. For example, a lot of people were very co-operative, but some were very suspicious about it, why Government wants to know, so many 'personal enquiries' about their life, how will it benefit them, or is this part of some sinister campaign against the community, what is the 'motive' behind it? There was wide mistrust seen for the government. Also, the religious identity of the researchers made a difference, for example, people were reluctant to divulge too much information to a person from the majority community, or they tried to be 'too politically correct' to them. The gender of the researchers was also a factor, as women found it easier to enter homes.

When we asked our respondents the reasons for Muslim backwardness in education, a lot of them blamed government policies, some blamed the community itself and some cited

¹ The present paper is based on the fieldwork for a large research study entitled, 'Education of Muslim Children in Delhi: the Dynamics of Decision-Making and Possible Modes of Intervention to promote their Educability' commissioned by the Delhi Minorities Commission, New Delhi (June- July, 2006). It was done under the supervision of Prof. Imtiaz Ahmad and Sabiha Ahmad. The study was in the nature of a survey that extended over seven Muslim dominated areas. In the first stage, enumeration of 150 households was done. In the second stage, out of those houses detailed interviews were done in twenty households. Then the schools were surveyed around the 1-2 km radius of the locality, where the children were studying and detailed interviews of two teachers were taken there. Given the nature of the study, paper is based on interviews, case studies and observation in the Muslim majority areas of Old Delhi (Turkman Gate, Bara Hindu Rao), Okhla (Zakir Nagar, Abul Fazal Enclave), Seelampur and Usmanpur. The names of the respondents have been changed.

² Delhi's literacy rate — recorded as 86.34%. (Census 2011) (Apr 5, 2011, The Economic Times).

³ <http://realitycheck.files.wordpress.com/2006/12/sach2.JPG>

historical factors like partition⁴, etc. Many Muslims also asked for reservations for Muslims to remove their backwardness.

Some major factors which affect education amongst Muslims in these Muslim majority areas are –

Settlement Patterns, Segregation⁵ and Social Composition

Most of the localities surveyed like Okhla, Old Delhi, Seelampur, etc. are segregated Muslim areas⁶. Kin- based neighborhoods⁷ are fairly common in these areas. The density of population is usually very high in these settlements. Real estate prices are high in Muslim localities, and because of congestion, houses keep on growing upwards as they can not expand otherwise. For example, in Abul Fazal Enclave prices would be higher as compared to say, Mayur Vihar.⁸

Most of these localities in Delhi are middle and lower middle class. Some upper class people can be found too, as they find living in Muslim majority areas better from the security point of view. (They often cite Gujarat riots as an example, that Muslims were safer in Muslim areas as compared to mixed localities).

⁴ Educated upper and middle class left for Pakistan that is why literacy levels fell for Muslims.

⁵ . Segregation is an institutionalized form of social distance expressed in physical separation (Encyclopedia of Social Sciences). Robert Park (Human Communities: The city and human ecology: II, New York, The free press, 1952) observed, “The process of segregation establish moral distance which make the city a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate”. The urbanites thus live in several different physically contiguous but otherwise widely separate cultural worlds’

⁶ These areas are inter-connected by a shuttle-service of jeeps called ‘phat-phat sewa’, which helps people to commute between these areas for work/socializing, etc.

⁷ According to Nirmala Srinivasan (1981) it is not due to an intentional effort on their part, but a result of acute housing problems. Since help of relatives is usually sought for getting accommodation, hence the growth of ‘kin-neighborhoods’

⁸ All Muslim localities end up looking like same’, observed Prof. Imtiaz Ahmad in an informal conversation.. Mostly a linear settlement pattern followed with lots of narrow streets with lanes and by lanes, a booming bazaar on the main street selling everything from grocery, meat, and other necessary items of daily use to clothes, shoes, etc. Cooked food is easily available too, with hotels selling tandoori rotis to biryani, to fried chicken and other popular dishes of Mughlai cuisine with cheap rates. The availability of food is also a reason why people prefer living here. It also helps recent migrants to the city in getting good, tasty, cheap food. Most of the residents in these localities were migrants from U.P. and Bihar.

These aspects of Muslim life affect education in a big way. Due to the constraints of space, schools are few, especially in Old Delhi. Okhla though is full of schools, but these schools lack basic facilities like playgrounds, big spacious classrooms, etc. Most of the schools found in Okhla are all private schools lacking recognition (often till primary) and are mostly Muslim majority schools. They facilitate education for children, as the 'distance' factor favors them, and helps parents to send their children to a nearby school. Almost all the people interviewed complained about the lack of government schools in their localities. They all wanted more government schools with better facilities.

Since, most of the schools in these localities mostly have students from nearby areas only, (i.e. mostly Muslims); these children have no interaction with the kids of other communities.

Caste and Class Factors-

Muslims in India can be divided into Ashrafs and Ajlafas. Ashrafs, claim foreign descent, and Ajlafas are converts from Hinduism. While the Ajlafas are the toiling masses and peasants, the Ashrafs are the Sayyids, Sheikhs, Pathans and Mughals. The social gradation among the Ajlafas are mostly determined by their past social (caste) backgrounds. At the bottom of social ladder are those Muslims who did scavenging, sweeping and such other unclean jobs, they are called Arzals. Maintenance of group identity by creating social boundary through relative endogamy, commensality and limited social interactions in various spheres of life amongst the Muslim groups are noticeable. (Ahmed 2000)

There is a strong caste /class nexus amongst Muslims⁹. The higher caste Ashrafs form the higher class and middle class mostly, while Ajlafas form lower middle and lower castes and Arzals lowest class.¹⁰ This distinction extends in the field of education and occupations too. Amongst the educated and the professionals are mostly Ashrafs. Some of the other middle castes have done well for themselves like Ansaris, Saifis, etc. Some of the other castes may be better off financially (for example, Quraishis / Telis) but are not advanced education wise.

⁹ 'Zat' are the local social groupings, and Ahmad (1976) translates it as caste. The castes (zats) are broadly similar groups, possessing a set of attributes which are closely identical to the ones commonly associated with the caste system in India. The first characteristic of the groups is that they bear distinct names which are used to identify all those belonging to the group. These names are either derived from the occupations with which their members are traditionally associated with or denote their source of origin. Thus, names like Julaha, Teli, and Faqir, which respectively refer to their traditional occupations. Or names like Khanzada, Sheikh indicate the source from which the members of these castes claim their origin and descent.(Ahmad 1976)

¹⁰ With a few exceptions, of course, these are observations from the field.

Lower castes are behind not just in terms of income, but are behind in the field of education too. The reason behind it may be due to their family occupations which are skill based (embroidery, tailoring, etc.), so, they mostly educate their children till middle school, after that they join their family businesses. So, economy of the family (class) along with the family's social status (caste) affects the educational status of the family. Some of the Muslim families favoured reservations for Muslims in schools and employment. They often said, "Muslims do not get jobs due to bias, so it is better to work in one's own business."

The Karkhana¹¹ Business-

"Often workplace is an extension of the Muslim households", says Imtiaz Ahmad¹². A lot of families especially in Old Delhi (also, in Seelampur) are of small entrepreneurs having their own karkhanas on the ground floor and residences on the first-floor. Men often loiter around homes, as workplaces are nearby so they may always be found at home. Young boys, often drop outs from schools may also be found sitting around in the neighborhood.

Most of these men work from home. This plays a crucial role in the family as they are active parents, keep a close watch on the child and his activities and take a keen interest in the domestic affairs of the house. Men are mostly more dominant in these households. During interviews, if both men and women were present it was the husband/ father who did most of the talking. The karkhana is also a factor behind the high drop-out rate of Muslim boys. Shakeel, a resident of Usmanpur, has four children. His eldest son helps out in the family business of shoe-lights and is a drop- out. Rest of his children are young and are studying for now.

Since the karkhanedars' business is more skill based, they do not stress on their child's education. Often, since they are themselves not highly educated, they have to hear smart excuse stories from their children.

Ahmed Sheikh's family had mirror making business in Old Delhi, his son is a drop-out. We asked him for the reason behind it and he came up with an interesting story. He said his son went to a government school and he failed in his class. He failed, not because he was not bright enough but because he had heard his Hindu teachers' plan that they will fail most if not

¹¹ A karkhana may be defined as a workshop for manufacturing machinery or spare parts of machinery in which not less than two and not more than thirty five persons may be employed. (Rizvi, 1976)

¹² In an informal conversation

all Muslim children in the class. It was a story which was hard to believe, we were not sure if it was true or maybe the boy had very intelligently fooled his parents and turned a small issue into a communal issue, to save his skin. The kind of environment that these kids find at home is also not very conducive for studies so mostly, they drop-out of their schools.

Boys vs. Girls

There was not much discrimination seen amongst boys and girls. Mohammed Sabir is a vegetable vendor in Okhla. He sends all his three children, two girls and one boy, to government school. Although he says very interestingly, that he has to spend more on his daughters (on clothes, make-up, etc.) than on his son, but would still like them to study.

In fact, in Muslim families, as boys join family business they have a high drop-out rate while in the same families girls keep on studying often, if not through regular school, then through correspondence. They get university degrees as private students (mostly from Jamia Millia Islamia). Boys usually do not get time to study privately, so often they end up as high school pass outs. But, a lot of girls in Turkman Gate/ Usmanpur also complained that they wanted to study but left education as they ‘had to take care of the house’/ ‘had nobody to guide them’/ ‘had family pressure to get married’/ ‘parents did not allow them to go far from home for security reasons’, etc. There were numerous reasons given for leaving studies mid-way by the girls’, while for boys most had just no interest in educating themselves as it ‘was not required for their trade’.

So, in technical streams like science, medical, engineering, etc. and also in administrative services the number of Muslims is very less, since most just do not opt for higher education.

The Language Factor

Muslims have articulated their minority issues in collective symbols of identity of language, law and religion. (Srinivasan 1981). For Muslims, Urdu has always been an emotional issue, a language tied with their identity, especially after independence. They see it as important for their kids to learn it as “it is part of their culture”. But, they admit that it has few job prospects so, most middle class parents would prefer to send their kids to an English medium school, where Urdu is taught as a third language. Also, it is important for the kids to learn Quran; they should be able to recite it. Thus, for religious purposes, it is important to learn Arabic (“at the death of a family member, child should be able to offer sawab by reciting Quran”, said one

Islam and Muslim Societies : A Social Science Journal Vol. 5, No. 1 – 2012

parent). Children often, after coming from school, go for tuitions and then go to a maulvi for Arabic lessons. Thus, it makes an average middle class Muslim child multi-lingual, as he learns English ('demand of the time'); Hindi ('as it is our national language'); Urdu ('for cultural reasons') and Arabic (for religious reasons), increasing the pressure on the child. Some poor parents still send their children to Urdu medium schools as they are cheaper. A lot of lower class parents are also sending their children to madarsas in Usmanpur, as they feel Muslims even otherwise are not going to get good jobs. Madarsas do not charge any fees and are backed by religion as well.

Government Schools vs. Private Schools vs. Madarsa

Muslims of middle class and upper class are going to private English medium schools. Lower class would prefer English medium schools but due to economic constraints send their children to government schools. Muslim parents want their children to learn their culture and language so, they give private Arabic tuitions or send them to mosques to learn. Not much enthusiasm is seen for madarsas in Delhi, except in Usmanpur where a few people wanted their children to have "deeni talim" as it will help them 'not just in this world, but after death also.' In Okhla (Zakir Nagar), there are primary (and sometimes till VIII std) English medium schools in every street. It shows the enthusiasm for education amongst the Muslims, as its proximity to Jamia Millia Islamia is a major factor behind the high literacy level of the residents of this locality.

Thus, enthusiasm for good English medium secular education can be seen amongst the middle class of Muslims (which is growing but is still not very significant). Even if the lower class wants, they do not have the means for it.

Women

The roles of women are changing. They are working and contributing to family incomes. Women work from homes, do zari work, and embroidery, handicrafts, etc. and contribute to the family income in Old Delhi and Usmanpur. Irshad Ali of Usmanpur has seven children, five daughters and two sons. Four of them are studying, two elder girls are drop-outs, and one is still young. Since, both he and his wife do not keep well, his eldest two daughters help out by doing embroidery and handicraft work from home. In Zakir Nagar in Okhla, working women were found, which also proved a factor in purdah being less observed here as

compared to other localities. Literacy level is high too in Okhla. Shah Hasan, is a teacher in U.P. and his family stays in Abul Fazal Enclave in Okhla. Out of his three daughters, two are working and act as the decision-makers of the family in the absence of their father. Mother too trusts and relies on her educated daughters more than her younger son.

Yameen, works in a beauty parlor in South- Extension, has three children; of whom one is school going, his wife is doing a private B.Ed course which will enable her to teach in one of the numerous schools in Okhla, and will then be able to contribute to the family income. We also met Shabina, Nazim's wife who lives in Usmanpur, who had no idea either about her children's school nor about the class they were in. According to her, these are matters which her husband (who had a karkhana on the ground floor) looks after, her job is to cook and look after the house and kids. Even for her clothes, bangles, etc. she depends on her husband to buy them for her. Her neighbor Sabeena, is also an illiterate, but takes her kids to school, attends their PTA meetings, and is making efforts to educate her children. So, there is huge diversity seen in the roles being played by Muslim women today.

Much enthusiasm was seen amongst Muslim women with regard to education as compared to men, who were more cynical about the community and the country.

These observations are based on the fieldwork, interviews and case studies. The difference of opinion seen among Upper middle and middle class (Zakir Nagar, Abul Fazal, Okhla) and lower class (Usmanpur, Seelampur) are most diverse with regard to education from interest and enthusiasm to near indifference whereas Old Delhi(Turkman Gate, Bara Hindu Rao) lie somewhere in between the two ends of the spectrum. Interestingly, it also show that presence of resources, (numerous schools in Okhla, along with Jamia Millia Islamia) has an effect on literacy (high literacy in Okhla) rate as compared to absence or negligible resources (Usmanpur/ Seelampur) (low literacy rate in Usmanpur/ Seelampur). But, everyone across all areas and classes wanted more government schools in their areas.

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