

Madrassa and Girls' Education: Reflections from a Muslim Village of Assam

*Sofica Ahmed**

*Rabin Deka***

Abstract

Education is believed to be the best means through which gender discrimination can be eradicated from the society. Historically, Muslims in India have had a lower participation in school education because of social-structural reasons. In their limited choice, a key role is also played by the Madrassa form of education which, in its various forms, includes both secular as well as religious components. The present paper is an attempt to understand the causes behind the differential preference of Muslim parents regarding their children's education. It tries to deal with the issue of why poor working class Muslim parents prefer Madrassa education for their girl child over the secular one. It tries to explore Muslim girl's experiences with education at household and school levels. At the household level, why do they prefer Madrassa kind of education rather than secular? How do different families make gendered choices in terms of educating their child? It is observed that the selection of school depends not just on economy but also on cultural ideas about the good conduct of young men and women. It will also explore a particular madrassa and examine if similar cultural logic functions in Madrassa Schools.

Introduction

Education is believed to be the best means through which gender discrimination can be eradicated from the society. It is the first step towards establishing equality in a stratified society like India. However, the inherent structural inequalities of Indian society in terms of caste, class, race,

religion, ethnicity, and gender resulted in the deprivation of the people living in the margin of their right to education. Historically, Muslims in India have had a lower participation in school education because of social-structural reasons. In their limited choice, a key role is also played by the Madrassa form of education which, in its various forms, includes both secular as well as religious components. Madrassas are the Islamic religious educational institutions. The word Madrassa is an Arabic word which means educational institution.

Despite various legal provisions that prescribe equal rights and privileges to both men and women, the majority of women are still unable to enjoy the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them. Various studies on the issue of education among Muslims suggest that in spite of various attempts made by different governmental and non-governmental agencies a section of Muslim women are still far away from the light of education and because of this reason they have a lower social status compared to the women from other communities (Menon, 1981; Engineer, 1994; Hasan and Menon, 2004, 2005; Qasmi, 2005; Soni, 2010; Narula, 2014). While studying the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community in India, by using large scale empirical data to highlight the deep and extensive deprivations that Muslims in India face, especially in the sectors of education, employment, public services and so on, the Prime Minister's High Level Committee popularly known as the Rajindar Sachar Committee, outlines that Muslims across most parts of India deeply suffer from high illiteracy, a high drop-out rate, depleting asset base, below average work participation and lack of stable and secure employment (Fazal, 2013). M. Burhanuddin Qasmi, in his study "Education of Muslims in India - Problems and Prospects" rightly says that in recent times the question of Muslims' Educational backwardness has been an important constituent of political and social discourse in India. For him Indian Muslims have four principal problems, which are the real obstacles in all educational, economic and socio-political participation of the Muslim community. They are, firstly, the absence of true Muslim leadership in the post-partition period and until this day; secondly, lack of security; the third principal problem is their low income; and the fourth is the discriminatory attitudes of the majority community towards them (Qasmi, 2005).

Other similar studies also reveal the need of a close analysis of the issue of Muslim women's education. Zoya Hasan, a noted academician, also realized the ignorance and invisibility of Muslim women among academics and activists in India. For her, this invisibility is not a recent phenomenon; here she referred to Gail Minault, who said, imperial discourse in colonial India overlooked Muslim women because the 'purdah' kept women aloof from scrutiny, both literally as well as figuratively (Hasan & Menon, 2004). Devna Soni, in her understanding of the status of Muslim education in India, acknowledges that any debate or discourse on the subject of Muslim education will be incomplete without discussing the issue of concern and controversy of religious education imparted in the madrassas. With regard to modernity, the author emphasized that Muslims fear that modernity challenges religion. Religion is an integral part of their personal identity, constantly under question in a fast-paced material world. For her, the Muslim since the age of the British, stuck to old and outdated curriculum because they think it is in line with the safeguarding of their religious heritage and tradition. For her, the madrasa curriculum can be seen as a classical example of the above phenomenon (Soni, 2010).

Empirical evidences also suggest that Muslim community generally prefer madrasa education for their children, and especially for the girl child. The idea behind this is that the boy child is the future earning member of the family for which he has to learn more or as much as he can, especially secular subjects, after completion of which he can manage to get a job. Girls, on the other hand, are supposed to marry and raise a family. At home and in the school, one of the main objectives of learning for girls is to inculcate good behaviour among them which can help them in the marriage market. Thus, the present study is an attempt to know why the poor Muslim parents of the village prefer madrasa education for their girl child. It tries to explore the Muslim girl's experiences with education at household and school levels. At the household level, why do they prefer Madrasa kind of education rather than the secular one? This paper will try to explore the subjective meaning that parents attach to this kind of schooling, particularly for their girl child. It will also explore a particular madrasa and examine if similar cultural logic functions in other madrasa schools. How do different families make gender choices in terms of educating their child? It tries to

throw light on why these girls discontinue their studies after class 8. Is the main task of the Madrassa School to inculcate Muslim cultural values among the girls along with elementary education? The finding to these basic questions is the main objective of this paper which is seen in this particular village of Assam.

The Study

This paper is mainly based on the field survey conducted in a Muslim concentrated village of Sonitpur district of Assam. The village, Bhojkhuwa Chapori, is located by the side of the river Brahmaputra; it developed out of a small habitation initially established by Rabha, Nepali and Bengali migrant people coming from different parts of the country during the colonial period. The Rabhas are the one of the Scheduled Tribes in the plain districts of Assam. They are a widely scattered tribe, but mostly concentrated in Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam. The Nepalis are the Indo-Aryan and Sino-Tibetan citizens of Nepal. Scholars have argued that they migrated to Assam during the colonial period in search of food and employment and thus their assimilation with Assamese society started. Bengali Hindus are ethnic Bengali adherents of Hinduism, and native to the Bengal region of the Indian subcontinent. They speak Bengali language which comes under the Indo-Aryan language family. However, the original inhabitants of this flood affected riverine village were replaced gradually by the Bengali Muslim immigrants from Bengal Presidency (the present day Bangladesh) during the pre-independence period. They were mainly from the Mymensing district and were known as Mymensingia Muslims. The primary occupations in the village have been daily wage labour, small scale business and cultivation. There is one L.P., one M.E. Madrassa, one High Madrassa, one Senior Madrassa and one private school in the village. It is worth mentioning here that the L.P. school of the village was established in 1927, quite some time before independence.

The M.E. Madrassa was established in the year 1943 whereas the other schools were established in the 1960s. The private school in the village was established in 2001, and this school has attracted a large number of students from the surrounding area; it has also become popular with parents from all socio-economic levels. Thus the study is mainly based on primary

data collected from selected households, teachers and headmasters of the schools located at the village as well as secondary data from various published and unpublished sources. A sample of 120 households was selected among approximately 659 households. Though the target group of the study is mainly women from different age groups, the study also gives emphasis on the viewpoints of male heads of the households. The data were collected through the interview method together with the observation method.

Socio-economic Profile of Households

Socio-economic conditions are important indicators through which all other related issues can be examined. Information on the monthly income of the family, the type of houses, drinking water source, toilet arrangements, cooking fuel arrangement, source of power in the house, personal/ family, movable/ immovable property details, agricultural land details and so on are very closely linked with the nature of expenditure of the family. Most of the households of the village are poor and marginalized. Most of them lack the basic amenities of life, e.g., proper toilet arrangements, water facilities, and so on. But almost all households of the village have electricity facility. Most of the people of the village are engaged in low paying jobs such as daily wage workers, small scale business and agricultural labour, and a small number educated Muslims are seen in government jobs as teachers, clerk and so on. There is an increasing number of self-employed Muslims in the village such as rickshaw pullers, car mechanics, carpenters, masons, tailors and so on. Thus it is seen that these marginalized Muslims of the village are distinctly absent from the wealth creating occupations which is also the direct result of their lower educational background. The total population in the village is approximately 5030, with 2514 males and 2516 females. Most of the couples of the village have more than two children. Preference for a son, who can be a helping hand in the future, is one of the main characteristics here. A sizable number of disabled is another important characteristic of the village. Most of these disabled belong to the poor socio-economic category. Thus it further indicates the connection between poverty and disability, as with all other reasons, their poor economic conditions is one for which they could not afford medical expenses of their child.

The Scenario at School

It is interesting to note that all the schools (one L.P., one M.E. Madrassa, one High Madrassa, one Senior Madrassa and one private secular) of the village account for a large enrollment of students from this marginalized section of society. While taking account of the students' profile the study tries to throw light on the girls from class VI to the matriculation levels. The logic behind choosing girls from this category is that this is the significant phase of the girls' life as they attain puberty in this phase. In this section we mainly concentrate on the functioning of the schools located in the village and their level of popularity among the parents and villagers at large. It is examined through the enrolment level of both girls and boys in each school of the village. Here the notion of Government and Private school, secular and religious schools are the main area of focus.

If we consider sex-wise differences in the enrolment level of the students, it is noticed that it is only the private secular school, where number of enrolled boys is high whereas in all the government madrassas where enrolment level for girl students is high. The main reason behind the highest enrolment of boys in the private school is mainly that the boy child is the future earning member of the family for which he has to learn more as much as he can specially secular one, after completion of which he can manage to get a job. Girls, on the other hand, are supposed to marry and raise a family. At home and in school, one of the main objectives of learning for girls is to inculcate good behaviour among them which can help them in the marriage market.

As the private school charges higher fees from the students, the poor parents shift their children to the govt. school where education is free up to class 8, but with a minimum fee after that. Regarding the popularity of the private school of the village, the Al-Kausar Model Academy, the headmaster claims that their school provides quality education to their students for which a large number of boys and girls of the village and surrounding villages seek admission. Here wearing a hijab for girls with a salwar is necessary. Inclusion of hijab for girls as a uniform in the private school attracts most of the parents of the village as along with secular education their children will also learn good behavior. One of the students of this

school secured a rank at the matriculation level which is another cause of attraction of their school. The headmaster also claims that the students from lower socio-economic status are also admitted here and that their monthly fees are managed by the school authority. Thus students from lower socio-economic status are also welcomed in that school.

Most importantly, Bhojkhowa Chapori Senior Madrassa accounts for the highest enrolment of Muslim girls. Gender segregation in the choice of school for girl child is clearly seen here. The high enrollment of girls in this Madrassa School located in the village clearly indicates a gendered notion in the selection of school for girl child. The easy accessibility of religious schools which can cater to the cultural need of the poor parents in inculcating good Islamic behavior among girls is an important possible cause of the popularity of Madrassa School for girl child of the village.

Though the enrollment level is high in these schools, the high rate of drop-out is another cause of worry. The rates of drop-outs are the same for girls and boys. According to the headmasters of these schools, poor socio-economic conditions, early marriage, ignorance, the conservative attitude of parents towards girl's schooling, the location of the school and the illiteracy of the parents are the main causes for the girls dropping out of schools.

While comparing primary, elementary and secondary schools dropout, Amirtham and Kundupuzakkal emphasized that the dropout rate increases in higher classes mostly after class 8 and 10. This is because the children cannot be failed before class 8 according to the Right to Education Act (Amirtham & Kundupuzakkal, 2013). Scholars like Zoya Hasan also find these as the major cause for which girls, particularly from the Muslim community, dropped out of their schools (Hasan, 2005). Besides these, a study by Anita Nuna finds that lack of proper classrooms, boundary walls and toilets in the schools are important problems for which the parents and the community did not send their children to school. Besides these, insecure feeling of parents about sending their daughters to school after attaining puberty is another important cause in this regard (Nuna, 2003).

Sometimes it is due to their lack of intellectual ability as the difficulty level increases in higher standards, especially in subjects like mathematics, science, Urdu and Arabic. The headmasters of the selected schools emphasized that:

Students from this marginalized community, especially girls, are generally seen weak in academic achievements, especially in English and Mathematics. Though Government constantly tries to uplift their standard of education through various means such as appointing regular teachers in the schools, providing minority scholarship for students securing 60 percent and above, still most of them are unable to perform better.

A study by Mohammad Talib, while representing the experiences of working class children in a school located in an urban village on the southern outskirts of New Delhi, finds that the average percentage of drop-outs is almost 50 for each year; they dropped-out before the session concluded as well as at the end of a given session even when they were promoted to the next class. Here the reason for their dropping out from school is their lack of aptitude (*ruchi*) for studies. He emphasized that the students play an active role in enabling the process leading to their ‘certified degradation’ and partially set the environments wherein they drop-out or fail in the examination (Talib, 1992). The present study also finds that girls were not interested in their studies and could not recall the “pedagogic knowledge” imparted in schools.

Another important observation is that all these schools account for only Muslim students; it means that students from other community are not seen in these schools. An *Anganwadi* worker of the village emphasized that they did not prefer any of the schools (private or government) of the village because only Muslim students were seen in these schools. So, they send their children to private schools located in the town so that they can learn better in a mixed religious setting. *Anganwadi* is a government sponsored program of child-care and mother-care center in India, which caters to children in the age group of 0-6 years. In Hindi, the word *Anganwadi* means “courtyard shelter”. It was established by the Indian Government in 1975 as part of the

Integrated Child Development Services Program to combat child hunger and malnutrition. This system is mainly managed by the *Anganwadi* worker, who is a health worker chosen from the community and given four months of training in health, nutrition and child care. An *Anganwadi* worker is in charge of an *Anganwadi* centre which covers a population of 1000.

The study finds a noticeable deviation in enrollment rate in these schools of the village. The enrollment rate decreases with increase in their standards. The dropout rates are higher from class 8 onwards. It is noticed that among these three schools of the village it is only the private secular school which has a gender ratio favorable to the boys. All other schools combined a religious approach to education together with the secular; in these schools girls outnumbered boys. The high enrollment of girls in Madrassa School located in the village clearly indicates a gendered notion in the selection of school for girl child.

Households Situation and Parental Attitudes on Education

Though most of the parents have a very low level of education, generally LP passed, and their grandparents are mostly illiterate, surprisingly they try to give a minimum level of education to their child, if not secular, at least the Madrassa education. The main objective of Madrassa curriculum is to give a religious education to their student with a little emphasis on secular knowledge. This character of Madrassa curriculum possibly cater to the need of the poor parents in making their child, especially the girl child, a good Muslim woman, and this ultimately helps them in marriage market. The children of these poor working class families generally take admission in the local government schools where free books and uniform, along with the mid-day meal, is provided. Here the efforts of *Anganwadi* workers of the village is also worth mentioning; they constantly visit village households surrounding their *Anganwadi* centre and meet their parents and create awareness about the importance of education, health and sanitation issues.

The parents who have a slightly better economic condition prefer the private school for their child. However, one striking feature is that some parents did not prefer the private school in the village because it is only for

Muslim children. On the other hand, they want their child to be educated in a mixed religious setting. Moreover, the parents from economically well off families tries to give their child both types of education, religious and secular. They prefer to impart Madrassa education in the morning from 6.30 and school education after that. One *Anganwadi* worker who herself is pursuing B.A. on private basis emphasized,

We did not prefer our child to study in village schools either Government or private as in these schools only Muslim students are seen. Children should learn in a mixed religious setting; only then can they inculcate good behaviour among them.

The differential treatment of Muslim parents regarding their children's education is clearly observed. It is observed that Muslim parents generally prefer Madrassa education for their children, and especially for the girl child. One woman having two children from a well-off family who earlier sent both of her children to an English medium school located three four kilometers away from their village, withdrew their girl child and took admission in the private school of the village. She said:

We withdrew our girl child from the earlier school because of security reason. Now she is close to us and we constantly keep watch on her and the school which she now admitted is 'Raju's' school, (Raju being a boy from the village itself).

The location of the school or distance of school from home is an important criterion in the choice of school for the girl child. While examining the notion of school choice in India Nirmali Goswami suggests that educational choices exercised in the working class families of multi-lingual and multi-religious village of Assam are connected with issues of marriage, work and gendered norms of conduct. Goswami (2015) opines, along with costs of education, gendered ideas of school proximity, security and discipline are of prime significance in their choice of high school for children and particularly for girl students.

It is important to note that a small number of families from lower socio-economic background also sent their children to the private school of the village. The school authority takes special care in such cases. They try to give free education to these poor students and in case of poor parents having more than two children, they try to give free education to one child. We mention the instance of a poor rickshaw puller, who had four children and sent them to the private school. The mother, though poor and illiterate, was aware about their children's education. When asked how they managed the monthly fees for their children, she said that if they needed, they compromised their meals, but not their children's education. Ross Baird, in his report, emphasized that many low-income families in India make substantial sacrifices to send their children to private schools, and as a result, private schools are in high demand (Baird, 2009).

The poor parents who have more than three girl children prefer their children to be educated at least to a minimum standard. There is a trend of marrying off their girls too early. In our survey it was seen that most of these girls cannot complete their studies and drop-out after class eight. In case of boys it is seen that most of the boys join their father's occupation and help them in the economic support of the family. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, in their study, also found the problem of high drop-out rate among Muslim girls for which they have argued that the absence of female teachers, single-sex schools, location of schools more than two kilometers from home, inadequate teaching and learning materials and lack of separate toilets exacerbated the gender gap in the education for girls. However, other related factors like late entry, early marriage and the problem of medium of instruction at the college level are other important factors that further complicate the picture (Hasan and Menon, 2005).

Thus, it can be said that along with economy there are numerous factors which influence the choice of school for children in this Muslim concentrated village of Assam. The poor parents give more emphasis on religious knowledge for their girl child and secular knowledge for their boys. Regarding the government-private dichotomy, it is observed that for a girl child, they prefer government school over the private one.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be concluded that educational condition of Muslim girls of the sample village is very low. When children from other communities are competing for high class professional jobs with professional and high levels of education, the children of the village have to take the burden of family and enter into the complex labour market with a very lower level of education. Most of the households lack the basic amenities of life and are engaged in low paying jobs. These poor families, with a large number of dependents, mainly rely on government schools where education is free, together with mid-day-meal, free books and school uniform. Though in the initial phase the enrolment of girl students were high in Government Madrassa School, they were seen to be dropping out from their studies after class 8. The early marriage of girls is the main cause here along with poor socio-economic conditions at home, illiteracy, ignorance, conservative attitude of parents towards girls schooling, absence of single sex school and the location of school.

Most of the parents prefer Madrassa education along with secular one. At home and in school, one of the main objectives of learning for girls is to inculcate good behaviour among them which can help them in the marriage market. It is observed that the selection of school depends not just on economy but cultural ideas about good conduct of young men and women. At the school level, it is noticed that among all schools of the village it is only the private secular school, where the gender ratio is higher for boys. All other schools which combined a religious approach to education with secular, girls outnumbered boys. The present field study shows that the Madrassa curriculum mainly imparts religious knowledge with little emphasis on secular subjects. The complex nature of Madrassa curriculum adds to the existing forces which compel girl students to withdraw from school. It is noticed from our field study that most of the girls discontinue their study from class 8, as it is difficult for them to cope with complex religious instructions because at home they only recites the holy *Quran* and follow Namaz but at school, besides these they have to follow numerous religious instructions.

References

- Amirtham, N.S. & Kundupuzhakkal, S. (2013). Gender Issues and Dropout Rates in India: Major Barrier in Providing Education for All. *Educationia Confab*. 2.4 (2013). pp. 226-233.
- Baird, R. (2009). Private Schools for the Poor Development, Provision and Choice in India- A Report for Gray Matters Capital. May 2009.
- Engineer, A.A. (1994). Status of Muslim Women. *Economic and Political Weekly*. pp. 297-300.
- Fazal, T. (2013). Millennium Development Goals and Muslims of India. *Oxford India Working Paper Series*. January.
- Goswami, N. (2015). Costs, Security and Discipline: Gendering the Debate on School Choice in India. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*. 22.2(2015). pp 1-22.
- Hasan, Z and Menon, R. (2005). *Educating Muslim Girls: A comparison of five Indian Cities*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited (an associates of kali for women).
- Hasan, Z. and Menon, R. (2004). *Unequal Citizens A Study of Muslim Women in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Menon, M.I. (1981). *Status of Muslim Women in India: A case study of Kerala*. New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House.
- Narula, M. (2014). Education Development of Muslim Minority: With Special Reference to Muslim Concentrated States of India. *Journal of Education and Research*. 4.1(2014). pp. 93-108.
- Nuna, A. (2003). Education of Muslim Girls: A Study of the Area Intensive Programme. National Council of Educational Research and Training, Sri Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi. URL:

http://www.nuepa.org/libdoc/e-library/res_studies/2003anuna.pdf.
Retrieved on 11 July 2015.

Qasmi, M.B. (2005). Education of Muslims in India Problems & Prospects. *Presented in a Conference on Children, Youth and their Education in a Globalizing India*, December 22-24, 2005. Organized by Centre for Postcolonial Education N1/70 Nagwa, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Soni, D. (2010). Muslim Education: A Study of Madrasas. Submitted to Centre for Civil Society, Working Paper No 237, Summer Research Internship 2010, Centre for Civil Society.

Talib, M. (1992). Ideology, Curriculum and Class Construction: Observations from a School in a working class settlement in Delhi. *Sociological Bulletin*. 41.1/2(1992). pp. 81-95.

* **Sofica Ahmed** is a Research Scholar of Department of Sociology, Tezpur University, Assam.

** **Rabin Deka** is an Associate Professor of Department of Sociology, Tezpur University, Assam.