

RECASTING THE DISCOURSE ON MUSLIM EDUCATION

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'Learning from best practices, all-out efforts must be made to raise the standards of all schools to a level where all segments of society long to get their children educated in them' | Photo Credit: MURALI KUMAR K.

India is home to about 213 million Muslims, the third largest Muslim population in the world. Over 11% of Muslims in the world live in India. They constitute 14.2% of the country's population. It is a national loss that such a sizeable section of society suffers from severe marginalisation, excessive exclusion, and deep deprivation.

In no sphere of social and economic life, including education, are they represented in the ratio of their population. In higher education, for example, Muslims account for just about 5.5% of total enrollment as well as faculty.

Muslims constitute around 72% of the religious minorities in India, but account for only 22.75% of minority educational institutions. In absolute terms, the number of educational institutions established, run, managed and maintained by the Muslim community would be substantially large. A statement, in 2019, by the Minister of Minority Affairs claimed that 13,000 educational institutions were granted minority status.

The actual number of schools, colleges and universities established, run, managed and maintained would run into several thousand, even after excluding madrasahs and maktabas. The community ought to owe a great deal to philanthropist forefathers who had the foresight to set up these institutions. Not wanting to rely on the colonial masters, they thought it their bounden duty to provide for the education of their children. They sought to become self-sufficient or 'Atma Nirbhar', to use the contemporary lingua. The tradition has continued, though not with as much fervour and the zeal as before.

Muslims aspire to access quality education for their children irrespective of the kind and type of schools, colleges and universities (government, government-aided and self-financed private). They do not necessarily want to study in educational institutions run by Muslims. Restrained by their socio-economic conditions and circumstances, a vast majority of them are unable to afford them. Therefore, the community must establish many more schools, colleges and universities to provide educational opportunities not only to Muslim minorities but also to all segments of society.

At the same time, Muslim students must be enabled to access any educational institution of

quality and choice. Critically, it appears imminent to improve the quality of educational institutions established and run by the community either as minority or non-minority institutions. Of late, there has been some development in this regard and some schools, colleges and universities have come to be reckoned to be among the best and the most sought-after. Learning from best practices, all-out efforts must be made to raise the standards of all schools to a level where all segments of society long to get their children educated in them.

The task is onerous and the path arduous. It may be easier said than done but will have to be done, sooner rather than later. Most Muslim minority educational institutions, particularly those established in the distant past, are resource starved. The aided ones suffer from a shortage of funds as grants in aid have not kept pace with the expansion in demand. The self-financed ones are constrained by the lack of affordability in the community that they intend to serve, and hence cannot charge adequate fees to cover the cost of maintenance and teachers.

Could the community come forward to support these institutions? Could these institutions attempt full cost recovery with cross-subsidisation and community members agreeing to bear the cost of education of as many students as they can bear? Could the Ulema come together to find the ways and the means of mobilising and utilising zakat for this purpose?

Adequacy of funds for physical facilities, teaching and research infrastructure and human resources may be a necessary condition for promoting excellence. However, it would not be sufficient in itself. Leadership, management and governance need special attention. Leadership, management and governance play a critical role in ensuring that the teaching-learning processes go on smoothly and that excellence in all spheres of the institution becomes a habit.

It is important that managers, managing committees, heads of institutions and their teachers work in tandem towards common institutional objectives as a cohesive team with goal congruence. This can go a long way in improving the teaching-learning process, reputation and brand building. It is a sad reality of our times that the appointment of teachers has been seriously compromised across all educational institutions throughout the country. Para-teachers, part-time appointments and guest faculty engagements on paltry sums have marred the system. Muslim-managed educational institutions have been no exception. Resource constraints may not be the only reason behind such practices.

Corruption and unethical practices in the selection and recruitment of teachers are no more exceptions. Allegations and accusations of demand for payments for permanent appointments have surfaced time and again, and too frequently. It would be naive to expect such teachers to deliver quality education. They may also be least expected to be ethical in the discharge of responsibilities assigned to them. In-service training and professionals too are important and can help teachers stay up-to-date with the latest research, trends, and best practices in education. However, no amount of training is likely to work unless institutions ensure the appointment of the most meritorious teachers by shunning all compulsions, considerations and pressures.

Fostering a positive school culture that promotes student engagement, motivation, and achievement too is a *sine qua non*. Can our institutions put in place restorative justice practices, encourage student-led initiatives, and support positive behaviour? These must involve families and the community in the educational process to promote student success using closer parent-teacher interaction, family engagement events, and community partnerships. The focus should be on fostering a culture of continuous improvement and encouraging stakeholders to seek out opportunities to improve their practice.

Essentially, the discourse on Muslim education must move from mainstreaming of madrasahs and their modernisation. The focus must shift to mainstream schools, colleges and universities,

which cater to 96% of Muslim children.

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