

Inclusive lessons

As Indian Muslim women live in a maze of stereotypes that perpetrate socioeconomic inequalities, a vision of 'new India' cannot be successful if the questions of their inclusion and equality are unattended. Such an equality cannot be secured without addressing the fundamental conditions of social justice: education and political participation.

Proponents of inclusion often lose sight of obvious divisions between Muslim men and women and between upper-class (Ashraf) and other (Ajlaf) Muslims. By equating the needs of poorer women with privileged Muslim women, a great disservice is done to Ajlaf women. This brings into focus the issue of educational under-representation and low political participation rates among disadvantaged Muslim women, particularly those belonging to the lower castes and classes, and a way to accommodate their aspirations in a new India.

As per the 2011 Census, 48.1% of Muslim women were illiterate; only 2.07% were graduates. Deliverance from ignorance and backwardness for Muslim women lies in their educational and economic advancement. Keeping pace with modernising India, many parents now consider it important to send their daughters to mainstream schools. However, this is largely limited to privileged, Ashraf Muslims. As highlighted by the Sachar Committee Report, lack of resources, discriminatory attitudes in schools, and the declining faith in the public schooling system have left Ajlaf women excluded from the mainstream. Such issues have brought girls closer to locally available, niche schooling options like nearby madrasas that are limited to a religious curriculum.

There is an emerging trend of private Islamic schools within less privileged Muslim society. Such schools not only offer training in Islamic subjects, such as value-oriented *adab* (discipline) literature, but also follow the CBSE curriculum. Lying at the intersection of modern and religious curriculum, these hybrid schools offer new educational opportunities for many marginalised adolescent Muslim girls. My research has noted that the rise of such schools in Bihar is reflective of the growth of educational aspirations in girls who come from poorer, more religiously conservative families compared to elite Muslims. In Bihar alone, there are around 50 State-recognised girls' hybrid schools.

The entry of girls into these schools is a bold step towards mainstreaming. Research suggests that graduates from these schools are opting for higher education in central universities like Jamia Millia Islamia. Education policy must account for such community efforts. To address the curriculum gap left by hybrid schools, universities could start bridge courses for such students, such as that offered by Aligarh Muslim University, thus offering a much-needed inclusiveness.

Education is a necessary, though insufficient, condition for Muslim women to become aware of and also change their sociopolitical circumstances. For this to happen, political representation and civil society participation is a must.

There has been an appreciable decline in active civil society engagement of Muslims post-Independence. Bodies like the All India Muslim Personal Law Board or the Ulema have stepped into this void as spokespersons for Muslim women, but the efforts of feminist groups like the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan have tended to get silenced in the largely undiscerning media coverage of issues that concern Muslim women.

The representation of Muslim women has been abysmal across political institutions. The Lok Sabha has had only 13 Muslim women MPs since Independence. There has been only one Muslim woman in the Union Council of Ministers in the last 25 years. To improve this situation, policy measures should aim at setting achievable goals for Muslim women and their improved

presence in deliberative bodies like the National Commission for Women and the National Commission for Minorities. The government commissioned a study in 2007 with an aim to frame a 'National Plan of Action for Advancement of Muslim Women's Education in India'. A decade on, it is yet to see the light of the day. Further, affirmative action can be brought through parliamentary laws on the lines of the now lapsed 110th and 112th Constitution Amendment Bills, 2009, which sought to reserve half the seats in rural and urban local bodies for women.

Agenda-driven interventions by the state could be a beginning in undoing the injustices of the last seven decades for Muslim women. Equality and social justice should not be hollow promises but articles of faith in a dream of 'new India'.

Shahana Munazir is pursuing an MPhil in Social Anthropology at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford

The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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