

NO RESPITE FROM POVERTY FOR MUSLIMS

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Social Inequality and Exclusion

The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) labour force survey reports that the economic condition of Muslims does not show any signs of improvement despite India being the fastest-growing large economy. An analysis of the data on economic and educational indicators for various religious groups reveals that Muslims are facing a vicious circle of poverty.

The NSSO's 68th round (2011-12) provides estimates of education levels and job market indicators across major religious communities in India. The educational attainment of Muslims is the least among all these communities. In urban areas, the number of male Muslim postgraduates is as low as 15 per 1,000. This number is about four times lower than that of other communities, including Hindus, Christians and Sikhs. The situation is similar for Muslim women. The number of male graduates among Muslims is 71 per 1,000, less than even half the number of graduates (per 1,000) in other communities. Similarly, the number of Muslims educated up to the secondary and higher secondary levels is 162 and 90 per 1,000 persons, respectively, again the least among all the communities.

Poor achievement at higher levels of education is partly a reflection of similarly low levels of school education or of illiteracy. Around half the Muslim population over 15 years is either illiterate or has only primary or middle school education. The number of illiterate people is highest among Muslims (190 per 1,000), followed by Hindus (84), Sikhs (79) and Christians (57). The number of persons (over 15 years) who have obtained just primary or middle school education among Muslims is 257 and 198 (per 1,000 persons), respectively. Thus, as compared to other communities, the distribution of the Muslim population is least at the higher levels of education and highest at the lower levels of education.

Likewise, the current attendance rate among Muslims is least across all age groups. The number of Muslim males of 5-14 years in urban areas attending educational institutions is 869 per 1,000 persons, which is the least among all religious groups. It is higher among Christians (981), followed by Sikhs (971), though it is lower among Hindus (955), possibly because Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have lower rates. The gaps in the current attendance rates of Muslims and those of other religious groups are increasingly pronounced at higher age groups.

That Muslims have the lowest attendance rates and educational attainment, especially in higher education, can be explained by their income level and higher costs for post-secondary education. According to the NSSO survey, the average per capita consumption expenditure (used as an indicator of income) among Muslims is just 32.66 per day, which is the least among all religious groups. It is highest among Sikhs (55.30), followed by Christians (51.43) and Hindus (37.50). As per the 71st NSSO survey on education (2014), the average course fee for college degrees in technical courses in government and private unaided institutions was 25,783 and 64,442, respectively. That is too high for Muslims to afford, given their per capita income.

Although children up to age 14 have a right to free and compulsory education, the average course fee per student for upper primary education is still 508 for the academic session. While the course fee is the same for all religious groups, its burden is highest among Muslims due to their per capita income. The course fee for upper primary education accounts for 8.5% of the yearly per capita spending for Muslims, followed by Hindus (7.4%), Christians (5.4%) and Sikhs (5.03%). The higher burden of the cost of education among Muslims, relative to their incomes, could be one of the factors responsible for their lowest attendance rates.

The high level of illiteracy among Muslims and the low levels of general education ensure that they are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty. The lack of higher education is adversely affecting their job indicators. The dynamics of labour markets are largely a function of the degrees of knowledge and skills. For example, the labour force participation rate (LFPR), defined as the number of persons either employed or seeking jobs, is significantly linked to the desire for work, which in turn is dependent upon educational attainment. Similarly, the quality of employment is strongly linked to levels of education and skills. Therefore, if a community is lagging in education, it risks being trapped in a vicious circle of poverty. This is a situation that is difficult to break out of without government intervention.

The signs of Indian Muslims being caught in a vicious circle of poverty are visible in terms of their low consumption expenditure and poor job market indicators, including LFPR, employment status, and worker population ratio. The NSSO data show that LFPR among Muslims is 342 and 337 (per 1,000) in urban and rural areas, respectively, the least among all the religious communities. This implies that only 342 persons per 1,000 persons of working age among Muslims in urban areas are employed or available for work. Similarly, the LFPR among Muslim women is worse than that among women of other communities. Given that Muslims live predominantly in urban areas (unlike other poorer communities like SCs/STs), where work outside the home could be available, this low LFPR is likely explained by their low levels of education.

Likewise, the worker population ratio (WPR), defined as the number of persons employed per 1,000 persons, is lowest among Muslims, both in rural and urban areas. Further, among urban males, the number of Muslims employed in regular jobs is only 288 per 1,000 employed persons, while the corresponding figure among urban Muslim females is merely 249, which is the lowest among all other communities. The number of regular employees per 1,000 employed persons is higher among Christians (494 among urban males and 647 among urban females), followed by Hindus (463 and 439), and Sikhs (418 and 482). Similarly, the proportion of households with their major source of income from regular salaried jobs is the lowest among Muslims.

The Central and State governments could take concerted steps to help Indian Muslims escape this vicious circle of poverty. One way to improve their situation is to provide a special incentive and subsidy system for higher education. That will ensure that schoolgoing students continue to higher levels of schooling and higher education. Similarly, students who don't wish to continue in general academic education must have access to vocational education from Class 9 onwards.

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