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Increasing Access to Basic Quality Education for Muslim Girls in India

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The expectations of all stakeholders should get addressed while making policies.

The Indian population is multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and is spread geographically between rural and urban areas. It can be observed that, during the last 60 years, some communities have progressed well, especially among urban areas, but a large number of other communities have been lagging behind in the sphere of education. Muslims, who constitute 12.4 per cent of population, as per the 2001 Census report, are at the lowest level of literacy.

This highlights the need to prioritise and implement measures to increase access to basic quality education for Muslim women.

Muslim community's perception about education

While working on a research project on behalf of Times Fellowships in 1993, the author conducted a nationwide direct survey of Muslim families across geographical locations and cross sections of society, with the question on whether women wished to educate their daughters. The answer from 80 per cent mothers was a resounding yes. This indicated that awareness for education already exists in the community. They also expressed in their typical local ways, the importance of education with phrases like - "people can grow old, but knowledge never ages", "a human being can die but not knowledge".

Hunar, Hisab and Himmat

During our various interactions with the community, diverse quality expectations were highlighted, which need to be addressed while designing the various system components. When quizzed on the reasons for their desire to educate girls, the answers varied. Some of them were:

- ◆ Education is perceived as an effective tool helps women to overcome any such obstacle thus empowering them
- ◆ General comprehension of the women increases with education
- ◆ They will not need external help for voicing their concerns; women will be capable to fight for their own rights
- ◆ Girls should acquire "*Hunar*" (skill), "*Hisab*" (basic accounting), and "*Himmat*" (courage). According to the author this can be acquired by incorporating the following features in education:
 - 100 per cent students should be trained in basic hand skills for one or two trades while, simultaneously, completing 10 years of schooling

- Spending 50 per cent of time in learning practical skills
- Entrepreneurship training in curriculum, and the likes.

Hence, the author feels that the education system must be made flexible to have the following characteristics:

- ◆ Due to the migrant nature of the community, entry and exit points in the education system should be made flexible
- ◆ The system should provide a constant linkage between aspirations of the society and education, and should provide for feedback and correction systems accordingly
- ◆ The curriculum should be such that it creates scientific and rational temper and inculcates values such as social coexistence, tolerance and gender equality
- ◆ Infrastructure such as school buildings, playgrounds, learning materials etc., should be adequate even for small locality schools. The school should be located within 2 km radius or easy common transport availability should be ensured for all

According to the studies conducted by the author in the Muslim localities, many of the mentioned factors were responsible for restricting access, especially amongst the girls. The expectations of all stakeholders should get addressed while making policies, and it can be ensured only if there is direct representation of all these groups while making policies.

Parameters to measure access to education and the desired status

What can be measured, can only be improved. Consequently, in order for Muslim women to gain improved access to education, we must evolve some acceptable and measurable parameters to assess the community's access to educational facilities, and availability of "quality basic education".

As regards desired status on these parameters, which can be our manifesto to ensure 100 per cent accessibility to basic education, we need to brainstorm with various social organisations and representatives from the community.

A few indicators for Muslim girls are (a) 100 per cent enrollment; (b) Zero dropouts (c) Distance learning opportunities and open school facilities

Constraints in achieving increased access

During the author's field research and nationwide survey of educational status of Muslims, the following constraints were observed:

- ◆ Systemic constraints: The rigid nature of our current educational system does not accommodate the aspirations of minorities

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◆ Communal conflicts: The political process in our country is increasingly becoming a victim of communalism and many short term decisions are taken in such a way as to push the community back to the point from where progress has already been made. Also some vested interests create communal conflicts, which affect peace in the community and create insecurity amongst women hence making it difficult for them to access education

◆ Socio economic constraints: Due to the vicious circle of poverty, many families cannot afford to keep their children in the education process for 10-12 years, leading to the increase



Image courtesy: Rachana Vikas Trust, Pune

in the number of dropouts. Unless we simultaneously implement changes in the social process and improve the utility of our prevailing educational system, the current educational access

will not be entirely utilised by the community

◆ Cultural Constraints: The quality of the current educational system does not provide enough motivation for parents to enroll their girl child into schools. Hence we need to work on two fronts -

- improve accessibility of educational initiatives for girls by way of flexible schools or open schooling,
- subsequently improve curriculum to make it more friendly for girl students thus removing gender bias.

Need for creating micro level models for educational access

Based on the identified factors, the need for effective intervention by all like-minded individuals and institutions has been highlighted.

As an example, the author would like to briefly mention a case study of a pilot project at Pune conducted in this regard in two schools. Five major stakeholders were identified at these schools, namely, the students, parents, teachers, the school administration and the municipal government officials. The author's team was the sixth stakeholder which represented social activists seeking changes. Informal and formal meetings of each of these groups were organised, formal surveys were conducted, and data regarding their views on the state of affairs at these two schools were also collated. Subsequently, cross group meetings between parent- teachers, government officials and school administration were held. This was followed by a brainstorming session on ways of improving the situation at the grass root level. There were many issues such as building repairs, absence of furniture, inadequate laboratory facilities, high rate of student dropouts, indiscipline and poor results. A common action plan was

created, and the group monitored these actions over one year. The teachers and parents decided to counsel dropout cases individually. The impact of the above mentioned entire programme resulted in changing the school environment completely; students and teachers started enjoying various cultural programmes and outstation picnics with enthusiasm leading to increased attendance in schools.

Actions recommended

Based on the background discussed, the following actions are proposed :

- ◆ A systematic status and need-identification study for minority community (girls and other children) involving Non Governmental Organisations (NGO's) and social activists, and all stakeholders of education
- ◆ Institutionalise community involvement in the educational system at every level by following the model described, at every locality in every school. Only active participation of the community can make and achieve the changes effectively
- ◆ Social audit of schools by local community, including minority audit
- ◆ It is the general perception that to provide access for Muslims to education, Madarasa education should be prioritised. However, the author opines that the role of Madarasa education is limited in the overall development and empowerment of Muslim children. This move may lead to further ghettoisation of the community. Muslim children require modern mainstream education. Access of Muslim children to mainstream education is an important issue, and should be acted upon accordingly
- ◆ This emphasises the need for more and more open schools and flexible access to education by making entry and exit points at multiple levels.

Thus we need to instill and reinforce the confidence within the community in the education system by making qualitative changes, creating community involvement in the



Image courtesy: Rachana Vikas Trust, Pune

whole development process by way of participation of the community through local educational committees. Access should be ensured for the girl child by the community by way of a holistic participatory approach.

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