

BOOK REVIEW

Malika B. Mistry (2021). Muslim Women in India Education and Exposure to Media. New Delhi: Genuine Publications & Media Pvt. Ltd., pp. 212, price INR 895.00.

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In the population of India, women constitute a weaker segment and in it Muslim women are the weakest. Yet, they have not attracted scholarly attention. Hence, this book by Malika Mistry covering Muslim women from the closing years of the last century to the early years of the present century with respect to their education and media exposure has not come a day too soon.

The study is based on the critical analysis of the findings of the four rounds of the National Family Health Survey covering the period from 1992-93 to 2015-16 as well as the Census reports of 2001 and 2011. After these introductory remarks, the author passes on to the discussion of the socio-economic conditions of the Muslims. She says that poverty is widespread not only among the scheduled castes and tribes, but also among the Muslims. By religious groups, every third Muslim is poor compared with every sixth Christian. The condition of Muslim women is particularly bad. A majority of them lives in urban ghettos and slums, facing drudgery and violence without the basic amenities of housing, water, electricity and sanitation. Nor do they have social security or access to the existing welfare policies of the state. The community is educationally backward owing to economic plight and its children face harassment in schools. Except in Telangana, there is little awareness of the minority scholarship schemes. In the case of girls, the additional problems are lack of schools and colleges in areas where most of them live, stress on religious education, early marriages and male domination. The next chapter deals with the demography of religious groups. Although the Muslims constitute only about 12 per cent of the total Indian population, their absolute number is large so much so that India has the fourth largest Muslim population in the world. State-wise the Muslim population varies with UP heading the list and Mizoram at the bottom.

The next set of chapters deal with the results of the National Family Health Surveys. The first Survey covering 1992-93 showed that in India as a whole, 66 per cent of Muslim women were illiterate

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with Haryana having the dubious distinction of as much as 98 per cent illiteracy. In Gujarat, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh the situation was better but still illiteracy was high at around 50 per cent. The second Survey was for the year 1998-99. It found that the Muslim women lagged the most in all the categories of education among the religious groups in different states. They composed of the largest number of illiterates. As the level of education rose, the gap between the Muslim women and those of other religious groups widened. However, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh fared better than other states. In Kerala where universal literacy was achieved, there were small proportions of illiterates among women of all communities, viz., Hindus, Muslims and Christians. But the disquieting fact was that Muslim women had a higher percentage of illiterates than Hindus and Christians. In addition, in states with a large Muslim population, the situation was worse and Jammu and Kashmir showed the worst picture where the Muslim women were 82 per cent illiterate. In the third Survey it was found that the Muslim women were less likely to be exposed to media vis-à-vis women of other religions. But for listening to the radio programmes, they were the second lowest. Overall, the percentage of women not regularly exposed to any media was the highest among the Muslims. The fourth Survey for 2015-16 found that the Muslim women lagged behind women from other religious groups in almost all the states in school attendance. In the backward states the differentials were large but they were small in the progressive states. In other words, while the benefits of development were wide-spread, full benefits eluded the Muslim women. As for the exposure to media, generally Muslim women were less exposed to any media than those of most other religions. This included newspaper/magazine reading, viewing TV programmes, listening to radio programmes and watching films in theatres. The percentage of women not regularly exposed to any media was the highest among the Muslims.

The author then passes on to the trends in levels of education and exposure to media from NFHS-I to NFHS-IV. As expected, there was a sharp decline in the percentage of illiterate women in all the communities. There was a drastic decline among the Muslim women too. It is heartening that there has been a sharp increase in the percentage of Muslim women who completed the middle school. In 2015-16, the percentage of women who had studied above the high school level was the lowest among the Muslims. As for the above high school category, while women of all the religions showed a sharp increase from 1992-93 to 2015-16, it was the slowest among the Muslims. As for exposure to various forms of media, there was an overall improvement among women of all the religious groups. But generally the Muslim women exhibited the lowest level of exposure to media.

Changing levels of education from 2001 to 2011 among the women are also examined. While at the all-India level the literacy rate improved for women of all the communities, Muslim women continued to be at the lowest end. In the non-technical diploma category, the highest increase was among the Muslim women. The author suggests that it may be that they opted for courses like diploma in Arabic, Urdu or Persian. She also feels that the Muslims are mostly self-employed and artisans. Hence, it may be easier for them to complete non-technical diplomas.

Finally, there is the conclusion. To bring Muslim and non-Muslim women on par, the educational status of the Muslim women needs to be improved. True, there are scholarships, but their disbursement is delayed. At the lower classes in schools amounts of the scholarships are too meager to be attractive. Computer literacy and self-learning need be promoted. In Urdu speaking areas, more schools should be established and Urdu teachers appointed. Provision of reading rooms and libraries is essential in these areas. Starting of Urdu pre-school classes in schools run by the government should be considered. Above all, Muslims should change their mind set and show more interest in modern scientific education. In addition, data should be collected on the education of Muslims as without it remedial action is not possible. These are some of the recommendations made which should be helpful in solving the problem of backwardness.

At the same time, there some recommendations which are of doubtful validity. Even if additional reading rooms are established, Muslim women are unlikely to use them along with male readers. On p. 197, the author says, "The Government should establish ITIs, VTCs (vocational training centers), polytechnics, etc., in order to train Muslim youth for employment." Does she mean for Muslim youth? On p. 198, it is mentioned, "Ensure adequate representation for Muslims in Government services and educational institutions including admissions in education." (She quotes two Muslim authors to this end.) This amounts to job reservations for Muslims which is impossible as other religious groups will also demand it and the judiciary has already put a cap on job reservation. On p. 199, she says, "Communalism against Muslims has to be fought as it leads to their ghettoization due to a sense of insecurity." Again, on the same page she suggests, "There is an urgent need for government and the political parties to treat Muslims in general and Muslim women as equal citizens and not as vote-banks." This amounts to arguing that there is a deliberate discrimination against the community in India which has dangerous implications for national polity.

Overall the book is a useful study of an Indian minority which will hopefully trigger more studies on these lines.