ABSTRACT

Status signifies an overall position of a person in a society by virtue of which the person has certain rights and obligations and enjoys certain privileges. One of the important aspects of the social structure of any social system is the fact that its members are differentiated and evaluated according to social positions they occupy in the group and any of the subgroups to which they may belong. The institutionalization of such processes of differentiation and evaluation constructs an elaborate system that configures different status for the members of the group. There are certain determinants of status which are generally known as indicators of status. These include income, property, education and training in skills that open up chances of employment, health levels, rights and privileges.

In terms of every set of indices of status, relatively women have been found to be at a much lower status than their fellow men. The lower status of women is the result of social evaluation of their biological characteristics. These characteristics are entrenched in social beliefs and values and such value system promotes male as being more important socially, while women to be submissive. The social differentiation of men and women tends to indicate the specific role that women have to play and as such reduces their chances of having equal status with their male counterparts.

The issues related to status of women are now being strongly discussed at national and international levels. In contemporary times there has been a growing trend among the social scientists to acquire and accumulate the knowledge about the status of women. The status of women can be seen to comprise the following aspects; control over economic production, role in household decision making particularly about their own life, extent of property right, sexual autonomy, public esteem, public authority and paid employment. The problem of the status of women by and large relates to the equality between men and women.

Women face subordination to men in all the societies and countries of the world and such inequality is more serious in the third world countries like India. Women in India have been denied equality of status and opportunities in the social and economic spheres which results in their low status. In Indian society the status of women has changed from time to time. In traditional India a women had a distinctly
inferior status that was based not on individual ability, skill and accomplishment but on inherited positions in the society. They were seen as only a member in a family or a group in the role of a daughter, wife or mother and largely denied the role as an individual with an identity, aspiration or right of their own. They were denied the right to formal education and were also not supposed to take up occupations outside their home. Although women from the lower castes and peasant groups worked on the fields, this fact did not however, alter their social status in the terms of their rights and duties. There are various factors responsible for the low status of Indian women. These constraints stem from illiteracy, traditional values and norms, dominant position of the male, superstitions, economic dependence of woman on man, social evils like dowry, polygeny, unaccountably of the husband to the wife etc.

After India became independent, the constitution of India conferred equal rights on women and men with the view to improve the status of women. The Constitution of India not only grants equality to women but empowers the state to take special measures for protecting and advancing their interests in all walks of life and making necessary legal provisions to this effect. Besides, special committees and commissions on women have been set up from time to time resulting in policy changes and setting up of institutional structures for implementing programmes and schemes. However, because of low levels of literacy among women they are unaware of these provisions being made available to them. Therefore, education is their dire need.

Education is the main factor resulting in significant social change in a society. Ever since the beginning of modern education in India showed that its spread has played a key role in the process of changing the status and social mobility of an individual. It not only adapts an individual to existing or emerging social situation but also has a creative role in the sense that it has the potential of liberating minds from the shackles of the established culture. Various sociological studies have also shown that education is a powerful factor in bringing about change in society. The educational system of a nation is the key to its prosperity and welfare and that no investment is likely to yield greater returns than investment in human resources of which the most important is education. It is the foundation on which the edifice of a nation is erected. However, it has been observed that there are differences in the
inputs and outcomes of education and that the differences seem to negatively and persistently affect certain populations, mostly the rural, the poor, the minorities and the women. Among these women are the most affected due to gender division of labour that makes them needed at home for domestic duties. The widespread social belief that domestic tasks pertain to women, makes them particularly vulnerable under fragile economic conditions. Various studies on the other hand have also pointed out the role of education in the amelioration of women’s status. These studies reveal that education led not only to the economic independence of women but also gave them self-confidence, and a sense of dignity. Though women’s status has changed a lot, yet they continue to keep a low social profile.

Special Commissions and Committees were set up from time to time to assess the progress of women’s education and propose suitable interventions to promote their participation in education. Various policies and programmes have been initiated by the central government for education of women. As a result of these interventions there has been a continuous rise in rate of literacy among women which can be ascertained on the basis of statistics available on women’s education. However, the gender disparity can be noticed in regard to male-female literacy rates. Gender inequality is one important aspect of many disparities in the field of education and inequalities between various religious communities is another critical aspect of this broader phenomenon of educational disparity in India. This gap in education becomes much more in case of Muslim women who are educationally backward both in comparison to women of other religious communities as well as to Muslim men. The educational backwardness of Muslim women is not only due to disabilities attached to the female status, but also due to the educational backwardness of Muslim community in the country. Muslims constitute India’s largest minority community and this minority identity leads to their alienation and withdrawal from the socio-economic life. Besides due to communal violence that India has repeatedly witnessed and had always Muslims at the receiving end, a sense of insecurity persists among them. With this picture of marginalization of Muslims in India, it is predictable certainty that the corresponding status for Muslim women is further skewed towards the bottom.

Contrary to this, Muslims constitute the majority community in the state of Jammu and Kashmir with 66.97 per cent of total population while Hindus constitute
the largest minority community with 29.63 per cent of total population according to census 2001. Other religious minorities are Sikhs (2.04 per cent) and Buddhist (1.12 per cent). Christians, Jains and others are negligible. Since Muslims constitute majority community in the state and there is no threat to their identity and no major cases of communal violence have been reported in the state therefore, present study is an attempt to explore the status of Muslim Women in this province. Further the Muslim women lag far behind in education and the key to their improvement lies in education. That is why the present study therefore, attempts to examine whether education plays any significant role in raising the social status of Muslim women in Kashmir with special reference to Sringar district. It has attempted to provide data and information base on their changing status for generating better understanding of the present situation. The study has analysed and interpreted data on all relevant indicators of status of Muslim women in district Sringar. Since very little is known about the status of Muslim women in Kashmir and no detailed study is available about their education and changing status, the work outlined therefore, seeks to address a significant gap in the literature on Muslim women in Kashmir.

The present study attempts to trace the effect of education on Muslim women and it is a descriptive work in this regard as descriptive research is mainly done when a researcher wants to describe the characteristics or behaviors of a particular population in a systematic and accurate fashion. It is also called Statistical Research as it involves gathering data that describe events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection. The bottom line in doing descriptive research is getting accurate measurements from a sample. Non probability Judgement sampling has been used for the purpose. The data was collected through semi-structured interview schedule and has been quantified and analysed using percentage analysis. To supplement quantitative data some case studies have also been conducted to ascertain the genuineness of the findings. They have helped increase our understanding of issues, both general and specific. Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been employed.

**The objectives of the study are as follows:**

- To delineate the socio-economic profile of Muslim women of Srinagar district belonging to different educational strata.
To assess attitudinal change among them with regard to education, employment, marriage, adoption of small family norm and status in the family.

To study the impact of education on the perception of Muslim women on their rights and status.

To find out the extent of empowerment they have achieved with regard to decision making relating to marriage and education of themselves and their children.

To make recommendations based on this study to promote the status of Muslim women in Kashmir.

The present study offers some relevant information about respondents, on their education, employment, *purdah* system, their socio-economic activities, particularly their social participation in decision making within and outside the family etc. We find a slow and steady change in their attitude and overall conditions such as their role in family, status and the socio-economic profile of the respondents indicates that education has led to considerable change in the status of Muslim women in Kashmir.

The empirical data gathered demonstrates age of the respondents and their educational level were found to be significantly related to each other. New generations of women had greater levels of education than the older generation and progress is being made towards gender parity. Parents’ education was found to influence respondents’ education, i.e., the higher the education of the parents, higher was the education level of the respondents. The present study also depicts a significant relation between the respondents’ and their husbands’ education. It was a matter of general observation that an educated man selects a relatively well-educated girl for marriage. Most of the respondents agreed that education raises the status of women. The respondents stated how higher education acted to enhance social mobility and status for themselves and their families. They cited several reasons for entering higher education; these ranged from personal interest, career aspirations, financial stability, personal independence and choices when thinking about marriage. More women were found to carry out higher education and become employed. The respondents reported a diverse range of careers and aspirations that disrupted the popular stereotypes of Muslim women as being relegated to the domestic sphere. Certainly among respondents were doctors, lecturers, teachers, bank employees and
other government and private employees. Mothers wished to see their daughters achieve a position of choice and independence in their life, where they would not be solely dependent upon their husbands and in-laws. The study highlights how Muslim women in Kashmir through their participation in education and employment challenge dominant stereotyped assumptions prevalent both in the literature and institutions, about them. The case studies also depict that Muslim women in Kashmir are highly motivated towards higher education and also reveals significant relation between the education of respondents and their parents and husbands.

The results provide empirical evidence that a woman’s educational attainment is an important determinant of a women’s age at first marriage in Kashmir. This implies that in the younger age groups, a married woman will have less education than an unmarried woman of the same age. The case studies also reveal positive relation between education of the respondents and age at marriage. The attitude of the Muslim women towards the early marriage has changed and a greater proportion of them were in favour of late marriage for girls. The nature of the responses suggests as the educational level increases, the girls are being increasingly consulted in the choice of their husbands. It was found that educated women have some say in whom and when they will marry. It was surprising to found that in spite of increasing education of women and their increasing role in the market economy, the practice of the dowry is becoming more wide-spread, and the value of dowry is increasing. It is interesting to note that dowry is generally not demanded from groom’s side on bride’s family in Kashmir. Mostly the gifts are given to bride by her family out of their own free will. In addition, bride’s parents are likely to believe that a generous dowry is essential to ensure that their daughter is treated well in her new home. All people whether rich or poor accept the dowry as the prevalent practice in the society because it is considered as an important part of marriage without which marriages cannot be solemnized.

Further it was found that education does not seem to have entitled the respondents to receive mehr in their marriage. It was found that, mostly in a marriage ceremony the mehr was announced in front of the gathering and not given, it remained only a paper transaction. In its actual practice, mehr has lost some of its original functions and acquired others, such as the demonstration of prestige. In fact, mehr is often renounced by the woman and does not function as a deterrent to
divorce. Its significance with respect to the status of women and their seclusion is that in those instances where women renounce their rights to mehr the most common motivation is to remain on good terms with husbands on whom they are economically dependent. Most of the case studies also reveal that women are deprived of their right to mehr irrespective of their education. Only few cases reported to have received mehr from their husbands.

The study reveals that respondents with higher education lived in nuclear families however; joint family system is prevalent in Kashmir. The respondents considered the ideal number of children to be two-three. Most women would like to have at least one son and one daughter as they felt both son and daughter are necessary and gave equal preference to both. With regards to the familial matters it was found that educated women in the family did enjoy some liberty with regard to various issues in the family and more equalitarian families were found where both husband and wife were educated. The highly educated women and those in gainful employment had enjoyed greater authority in decision making than the illiterate category of respondents. The purdah system in Kashmir reveals that majority of women don’t cover themselves in burqa at all. Mostly Muslim women in Kashmir believe that a modest dress of Salwar-Kameez and dupatta (to cover the head) fulfils the purpose of purdah. Very few, mostly elderly women wear burqa. The crucial characteristic of the purdah system was found in its limitation on interaction between men and women outside certain well-defined categories.

The present study also examines the problem of domestic violence against women in Kashmir. Women are often in great danger in the place where they should be safest i.e., within their families. For many, ‘home’ is where they face a regime of terror and violence at the hands of somebody close to them. Those victimized suffer physically and psychologically. They are unable to make their own decisions, voice their own opinions or protect themselves and their children for fear of further repercussions. The findings of present study reveal occurrence of both physical and psychological violence among the respondents. The physical violence was found more among the lower educated respondents while as psychological abuse was slightly more common among the more educated respondents. It was found that the abused women most often seek help from their own families. Very few women seek
help from any institutional source such as the police. They do not afford to speak against being abused out of fear for family dishonour. The case studies also reveal domestic violence both physical and psychological irrespective of education of the respondents.

In the present study it was found that the attitude of Muslim women towards work and their participation in different occupations are changing and have shown more favourable attitude towards these changes. This re-iterates the need to re-evaluate misconceptions about Muslim women in Kashmir. The most coveted profession was found to be ‘teaching’ due to the fact that the respondents felt that it was not too difficult to combine it with the work and role of homemaking. A large majority of those who were unemployed said that they do not find employment because of the scarcity of suitable jobs in an inordinately slow-moving economy. There is a positive change in the attitude of respondents, and that realization of the necessity of being employed and economically independent and growing sense of responsibility of improving the economic condition of family reflects the change attained by the respondents. Against the popular belief that Muslim women are discouraged to participate in the mainstream and that they are reluctant to change our study attempts to examine this belief and also assess the degree and direction of changes that have taken place in the status of Muslim women in Kashmir. The findings reveal that the respondents had access to some money and could spend the money according to their likes and dislikes. Similarly, freedom to operate bank account by the respondents is an indicator of economic empowerment. It was found that education improves one’s ability to have control over one’s income. The case studies also reveal that Muslim women in Kashmir have realized that education and employment not only give economic independence but plays an important role in boosting morale and confidence of claiming economic freedom, empowerment and equal status in the family and society as well.

The findings reveal that despite the fact that property rights for Muslim women have religious sanction, they are being deprived of it. They are prepared to forgo their rights in favour of their brothers as a form of future investment in the event of widowhood or desertion. Most of the cases also reveal that women are deprived of
their inheritance rights and only few cases reported to have received their share in parental property.

The above findings are in agreement with the few empirical studies carried on Muslim women in India. These studies also reveal that educated Muslim women did enjoy certain degrees of freedom within and outside the family. Higher the education, more modern were their attitudes and behaviour and higher was their status in society. These studies concluded that only education can be instrumental in ameliorating the socio-economic condition of Muslim women.

It can be concluded that there is an encouraging change in the role and status of Muslim women in Kashmir. They aspire to achieve equal status and empowerment by utilizing the opportunities of education and employment made available to them. In Kashmir today, women's education is viewed as a crucial human capital investment and an avenue to salaried employment, independence, decision-making and enhanced social status. No doubt Muslim women's education in Kashmir has made considerable progress and even parents are showing interest to educate their daughters along with their sons. Besides there has been perceptible shift in approach to women’s issues from welfare to development orientation and further to empowerment of women – economically, socially, politically and legally. Despite all these measures, there still exists a wide gap between the goals enshrined in the policies and programmes on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of Muslim women on the other. There is still a lot required to be done in this sphere. There is also a need to take more strict measures for improvement in education of Muslim women in Kashmir because education plays a significant role in raising the status of women. The planners, administrators and implementers involved must pay greater attention to guide the process of bridging the gender inequalities in education. Hence the greatest need of the hour is to raise social status of women. To bring about such a change, they have to be informed of what legal and administrative provisions are available in the country which is possible only through their education. The amelioration of the status of Muslim women can be achieved only if they receive proper education and become conscious of their rights as well as their duties. Education is therefore, their dire and essential need.