ABSTRACT

The role of education as a key to human resource development and economic growth is well recognised in contemporary society. Education not only broadens the mental horizon of people but also promotes socio-economic well-being of family, community and nation. It is an important means to achieve social mobility and move upward in the social ladder. In Indian society, well known for its cultural diversity, we can see sharp multiple inequalities and disparities in education and economic development in terms of caste, creed, tribe, religion and gender despite prolonged struggle and affirmative actions by the state to reduce social inequalities in independent India. Not all social groups have equal access to available resources and opportunities particularly in educational field. Women, in general, constitute the most deprived and disadvantaged section of Indian society who have always faced multiple barriers in getting educational opportunities. In independent India, however, women have made significant strides by entering in every field of education. Even then, a large number of women still remain restricted to vicious circles of family expectations, gender discrimination and stigma.

As revealed by available studies and government Reports women in general and Muslim women in particular confront constraints in social, economic, cultural and educational fields in independent India. In spite of many efforts women’s education continues to be in dismal position in India. Census data reveals an increase in female literacy rate during successive years, there is still a wide gap between male and female literacy rate. This gap is clearly visible in the state of Jammu and Kashmir where women constitute about half of the population. Within Jammu and Kashmir rural- urban differentials in terms of literacy rate are quite wide. Literacy rate is quite high in districts with higher urban population which are concentrated mostly in plain areas as compared to those districts which are primarily mountainous and have low level of urbanisation and resultant low level of literacy in general and female literacy in particular. Poonch is one among these educationally backward districts of Jammu and Kashmir. Despite the availability of significant number of studies on women’s education little attention has been paid to the study of educational status and problems of Muslim women in India. There have been some efforts to study the status of women’s education in Jammu and Kashmir but only a few studies have been
concerned with Muslim Women and their educational status and problems in Jammu and Kashmir. There is hardly any study concerning educational problems of Muslim women in Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir which is also known as ‘Mini Kashmir’. Keeping these factors in mind the present study entitled “Problems and Prospects of Muslim Women’s Education: A Sociological Study of Poonch of J& K” was undertaken with the following objectives.

**Objectives of the Study:**

- To study educational status and problems of Muslim women in Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir.
- To study the nature of their educational problems and to identify possible reasons for low enrolment and high drop-out rate.
- To understand the perceptions and attitudes of Muslim men towards women’s education and associated problems.
- To suggest suitable strategies to improve educational and overall status of Muslim women.

**Research Design:**

This study follows an exploratory and descriptive research design. It was necessary to collect extensive and comprehensive information in order to fulfil the objectives of the study. Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative data has been collected at individual as well as household levels. For the present study, Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir is chosen as a universe of the study. Poonch is one of the districts of the Jammu division located between 33°35’ to 34° latitude and 73°35’ to 74°30’ longitude. It is surrounded by Kashmir valley in the North; district Rajouri in the South and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) in the West. It is 240 kilometres away from winter capital Jammu and 530 kilometres away from summer capital Srinagar. A sample of 300 respondents (200 Muslim women & 100 Muslim men) was taken from 15 villages of Poonch district. Using multi-stage sampling technique, data has been collected through focussed group discussions and interview schedule. After collecting data through above mentioned techniques statistical analysis of data was done. Simple tables were prepared depicting the data concerning family structure and size, age, marital status, income, place of residence, education, age of entry at school
and fathers, mothers, and husbands’ education, awareness regarding governmental policies and programmes and most importantly factors and attitudes concerning low educational attainment of Muslim women in the study area. Data was analysed with the help of SPSS, Excel Simple Frequency and Cross Tabulation. Results have been presented in terms of percentage. Qualitative data has been presented through case studies.

**Findings of the Study:**

An analysis of quantitative and qualitative data shows that younger generations of Muslim women had better levels of education than the older generation and progress is gradually being made towards gender equality in matters related to education. Parents’ education was found to influence children’s education, i.e., the higher the education level of the parents, higher was the educational level of the respondents. Educated parents are likely to motivate and inspire their daughters for getting educated after realising the importance of education for their daughters. Economic status of the parents seems to be another factor which influences their children’s accessibility to education in a significant way. They were found less likely to discriminate between sons and daughters in matters of education on economic grounds. Parents who were economically well off were in better position likely to place the children including daughters in a better educational institution as compared to poor parents. The poor economic conditions of them badly affect the educational status of their children particularly their daughters. The present study also finds out a significant relationship between respondents’ education and their husbands’ educational level. The general observation that educated men are likely to prefer educated wives was found in the study. Age at marriage and education level of the respondents was significantly related to each other. It was observed that increase in educational level of respondents, their age at marriage also increases. But as only few respondents were highly educated, majority of them got married at an early age below 17 years. The average age at which these respondents entered school was 6-7 years. The main cause for the late access to school was lack of school at a short distance and mountainous topography of the district. It is to be noted that the average distance between school/college and home was 8-9 kms. These respondents either stayed near
schools/colleges in rented rooms or used to cover the distance partly on foot and partly by public transport.

The study further revealed that none of the illiterate respondents favour co-education system. Majority among semi-educated Muslim women also do not favour co-education as they want to maintain a clear-cut distance with male students whereas high educated women favour co-education and do not see any harm in sitting girls with boys in classrooms.

The present study out brings that the issue of Muslim women’s education and development is linked to a complex of factors which may facilitate or hinder their educational advancement. Gradual and positive changes in the attitudes of people towards Muslim women’s education are evident in increasing interest and concern among young girls and their parents for their education. Much needs to be done to improve their educational status by indentifying factors which work against their educational advancement. The prospects of Muslim women’s educational advancement largely depend on sincere and concrete efforts at local, familial and national level which can play an instrumental role in minimising the negative effects and maximising the positive role of socio-economic, cultural and institutional factors affecting Muslim women’s education in multiple ways.

The study clearly reveals that majority of the respondents, who never attended schools or dropped-out from the schools, stated poverty to be the major cause of their educational backwardness in spite of the financial assistance and fee concessions provided by the government. Though loudable, financial help provided by the government is not adequate enough to mitigate financial burden on their families. For, it also involves extra expenditure on buying books, stationary and other items required by educational institutions from time to time. These factors put together compel parents to withdraw daughters from their educational pursuit. Some time they are not allowed to go to school at all. However, in those cases where economic conditions allow parents to send a limited number of children to schools, sons’ education is given preference over daughters’ education and daughters are held back. Therefore, our study finds that gender discrimination is also one of the key factors that impede women’s education significantly.
Equally important factor which creates problems in the way of women’s education is their involvement in domestic work which does not allow them to get education. Besides, they also provide a helping hand in agricultural and allied activities. What is more important to note is that their education is not considered as useful as it is generally believed that women’s primary role is child bearing and rearing and to look after the household affairs.

Practice of early marriage which is widespread among Muslims in Poonch district is found to be another major factor that prevents women from continuing their education. Due to such practices they are left with limited educational opportunities, that too, for a certain period of time only. Ignorance and illiteracy of parents and the prevalent cultural practices in the study area prompt them to marry off their daughters at an early age. It also came out in open during the course of study that parents marry their daughters off in order to guard their family honour. It is suspected that interaction between boys and girls may lead some of them to enter into matrimonial alliances without the permission of their parents. In a society, like this, such type of relationship is not only looked down upon, but also ridiculed and parents of these girls are held responsible for their daughters’ behaviour. To circumvent any such possibility which might occur in future and to protect their family reputation and honour, parents marry off their daughters when they are quite young.

Lack of infrastructural facilities in the schools such as school building with a proper boundary wall, basic amenities like drinking water, separate toilets for girls, libraries and hostel accommodation were are also found to be the major problems in the way of women’s education and lead to high drop-out rate specially at secondary level. Lack of separate toilets facilities for girls in schools at this stage becomes a very strong reason for their drop-out. Most of the schools are far away from their homes without facilities for accommodation. Even if accommodation is available parents cannot afford it due to economic constraints. Transport facilities in most of the areas of the district are totally absent or insufficient. Due to the poor transportation facilities they could not reach school at right time or face difficulties. This problem was more serious for those women who belonged to border and hilly areas.

Another problem related to non-enrolment and high drop-out of these women was not only lack of separate schools and colleges for girls but lack of female teachers
also especially at high and higher secondary level as parents were found more interested in sending their daughters to those schools where most of the teachers are female because they feel more secure and confident with regards to their daughters’ safety in the presence and under the supervision of female teachers.

The educational set up in some of the primary schools in rural areas of Poonch has been adversely affected due to militancy because the teaching staff posted there is reluctant to perform their duties regularly due to the insecurity arising out of militancy. The state government has introduced Rehber-e-Taleem (RET) Scheme and posted local staff in rural areas to meet this challenge. However, this scheme has degraded the education standard because the staffs are generally raw and untrained. So students do not get good quality of education and girls suffer the most. They are not allowed to join coaching centre outside the areas and the result is that they could not pass the board exam even after two or three attempts and finally they are compelled to discontinue their studies at an early age.

Feeling of insecurity was found another important factor negatively affecting women’s education. People generally feel insecure in the border areas because of the uncertainty of the circumstances. They need to face various risks including drifting bullets and shells coming from across the line of control or mine related accidents. Every war or war-like circumstance leads to the mining of large areas. The presence of armed forces puts limitations not only on the movement of civilian but it also affects the normal functioning of civil administration. In such an insecure atmosphere it is the women who not only suffer the most but are also asked to stay indoors.

Muslim women’s education was also directly or indirectly influenced by the location of the household. It was observed that women living in the plain areas with better amenities of life were more educated than the women living in hilly areas with scarcity of these amenities. Thus, it was found that the socio-economic developments of the area positively influenced the Muslim women’s education. These observations get further credence from various case studies.

This is to be highlighted here that prevalence of dowry make parents calculative and worried about monetary pressure and cost involved in daughters’ education and marriage. The custom of giving dowry to the daughters is so
widespread that parents, willingly or unwillingly, spend heavily on dowry under social pressure. Thus, social environment works in two significant ways against women’s education. First, it convinces parents to underestimate the value of girls’ education and second, it forces them to spend on daughters’ marriage in the form of dowry in place of their education.

The study observed that socio-cultural practices, patriarchal values and prejudice against women restricted their access to institutions of learning. Many of the respondents disclosed that it was more because of their grandparents’ opposition, who had a significant say in decision making, than that of their parents’ that they were deprived of the chance of being educated. Majority of these grandparents were illiterates. Their illiteracy and ignorance especially those of grandfathers who had final say in decision making negatively affected their granddaughters’ education.

There is a general perception that one important reason for the educational backwardness of Muslim women is that their religious education is given preference over modern secular education. Firstly, because getting religious education is considered a necessity for them and secondly, they can get religious education at home only and do not need to go anywhere unlike formal education for which they have to move outside home to reach schools and colleges and remain there for many hours a day. Getting religious education at home is consistent with the practice of purdah which allows restricted movement of women outside their home with male escort. It is also assumed that in deference to their religious edicts Muslim women wear burqa whenever they go outside home, remain segregated and their freedom of movement is checked. These restrictions place Muslim women at educationally disadvantaged position. These common assumptions and observations may somewhat be true at some places but not always. In the present study, most of the respondents had only elementary knowledge about their religious faith and performance of religious rituals. Not all of them could read Qur’an. Whatever religious knowledge they had, they acquired it mostly through their family members. So far as purdah observance and their movement outside home is concerned, it was clearly observed during the study that most of them simply cover their head with a long cloth known as dupatta and usually move about to participate in different agricultural activities, fetching of water and timber etc. They require a male escort only under difficult hilly
terrain and the scourge of militancy. Thus, the present study does not support the popular belief that compulsion and acquisition of religious education and restrictions in the form of purdah do not allow Muslim women to avail educational opportunities for modern formal education.

Thus, it can be concluded that the efforts made by the central as well as state government and various NGO’s through various means have not completely succeeded in satisfying the special expectations and aspirations of women in the state due to many constraints discussed earlier. To promote the education of women at all levels and reduce the gender disparity in providing knowledge and education, a strong need based and committed state and community intervention is required to raise the educational status of women particularly Muslim women. There is urgent need to change the mindset of the people in general and community leaders in particular. To generate awareness and attitudinal changes among the masses regarding women’s education, NGOs and media can play a vital role as agent of social change by highlighting and discussing issues concerning Muslim women’s education at different platforms and motivating women to organise themselves into groups through which they can highlight their problems.

Little has been achieved by both government as well as civil society in the area of empowerment of Muslim women through educational advancement. So, much more needs to done on this count. More and more policy initiatives and proper implementation of programmes by the government combined with community leaders’ interest and sincere efforts for their educational advancement is the need of the hour. Existing programmes need to be reviewed as per current requirements. This requires serious attention from policy makers, administrators and community leaders.

**Chapterisation Scheme:**

First chapter presents an introduction to the study. At the outset importance of education has been discussed followed by an account of status of women and women’s education in Islam and review of literature. Second chapter deals with conceptual framework and methodology. Third chapter portrays the development of education in Jammu and Kashmir and Poonch district with special reference to education of Muslim women and their educational backwardness. Fourth chapter
presents the socio-economic and educational characteristics of the respondents. Fifth chapter presents the analytical part of the study and highlights the educational problems and prospects of Muslim women in the study area by analysing the data collected through the present study. Chapter six presents the conclusions and suggestions.