Chapter – 3
Religion and Educational Attainment: Theoretical Perspectives

A cursory review of the history of educational development in both developed and developing countries seems to unambiguously reveal that the path 'spread of education' generally follows is not straight or linear. The spread of education as well as its benefits reaches different regions and even within the region among different segments of population differentially. As a consequence, almost all societies inevitably exhibit educational inequalities which assume different dimensions. Educational inequality along religious line is an important dimension. In Indian context, a number of propositions have been put forth with regard to the educational deprivation among Muslims in relation to non-Muslims, especially Hindus. This chapter deals with hypotheses/theories offered to account for the educational deprivation of the Muslim community in India.

Inequality in education among different religious groups has engaged the interest of scholars in both the developing and developed countries. As a result, a number of large scale and a few systematic studies have been carried out in order to assess whether religious affiliation of an individual or a group does affect the socio-economic achievement in general and education in particular. In the West, researchers have tried to examine the influence of religion in conjunction with other socio-economic variables on education with very different outcomes making it extremely difficult to assess whether or not religion acts independent of other attributes in creating inequality in educational attainment (Glenn and Hyland 1967; Greely 1969; Najmi 1969; Muller 1980; Hirschman and Falcon 1980; Sanders 1992).

In India studies on religious differentials in socio-economic attributes are few. Again most of them deal with fertility differentials between Hindus and Muslims (Visaria 1974; Singh 1988; Algharajan and Kulkarni 1998; Mistry 1999; Maulasha and Rao 1999; Jaffery and Jaffery 2000). No such studies on similar lines pertaining to religious differential in educational attainment have been undertaken. What is mostly available is descriptive information on educational status of the religious groups. In addition, some macro surveys undertaken essentially by data collecting agencies such as NSSO in its 43rd, 50th and 55th
round, NCAER (2001) provide figures on educational attainment cross-classified by religion. In his study Ahmad (1993) has also tried to collect information on educational status of different religious groups for some states of the country. These surveys no doubt point to the fact that there exists differentials in educational attainment along religious line and that Muslims in this respect lag behind Hindus and Christians, but they do not throw light on how or what way religion does influence the educational attainment of its followers. Thus they do not go into the causes for educational backwardness of a religious community. Although Sharma (1978) has tried to probe into the problem at some depth, yet his study and findings are far from satisfactory as he failed to examine the problem in a wider perspective. Thus partly due to lack of valid statistics and partly due to absence of studies with analytical rigour, explanations proffered and hypotheses propounded to account for the relative educational backwardness among Muslims are either without empirical substantiations or are of very descriptive nature. Nonetheless, the available literature can broadly be grouped under- (a) Particularized Theology Hypothesis; (b) Minority Complex and (c) Characteristics Hypothesis.

**Particularized Theology Hypothesis**

The particularized theology hypothesis, in brief, assumes that religion provides a pattern of belief system; prescribes values, norms, attitudes; sets behavior and orientation towards life, which individuals share in groups and one religion differs from others in such matters. Religion might thus play an essential role in controlling, influencing, determining, limiting and guiding socio-economic achievement of its followers. Actually, the explanation offered to account for the educational backwardness of Muslims by Islamic theology and cultural ethos has had its genesis during the colonial period. After independence, this notion has been carried forward by a handful of scholars. However, it was Hunter (1869) who for the first time advocated that Muslims remained aloof from the new system of education because it was opposed to their tradition, unsuited to their requirements and hateful to their religion. According to him, for Muslims, education has intrinsically been linked to religion and in Islam emphasis has
always been placed on religious education. He argues that it is because of this that Muslims give preference to Islamic education imparted in madrasas and maktabas over modern education in schools or other institutions. Baig (1974) points out that the traditional orthodox, super-naturalism of Islam is totally opposed to scientific outlook. Unless social reforms take place within the Muslim community, Muslims will continue to suffer from social degeneration, economic stagnation and educational backwardness. Sharma (1978) seems to confirm this hypothesis. In his study he concludes that to say that the Muslim community suffers in the matter of education on grounds of economic compulsion is only partially true. Muslims are emphatic about the inclusion of religious teaching in the curriculum and this to a large extent, accounts for their aversion to the modern system of education. Thus the kernel of such arguments is that religious orthodoxy among Muslims prevents them from taking advantage of expanding educational opportunities and as a result they are under represented in the system of education in which education is imparted in formal schools.

**Critical Appraisal**

How far do these arguments/assertions stand valid? In order to asses the validity of the hypothesis under scrutiny, let us posit two basic questions: is there really something inherent in Islam that forbids Muslims to take modern education? Did Muslims really lag behind other religious communities, particularly the Hindus at the time when the hypothesis under scrutiny was advanced? To probe and answer these questions, in the first place it would be worthwhile to question the alleged nexus between Islamic theology and education in general and modern education in particular and finally to look at the educational status of different religious groups during colonial period.

Let us first take up the first question and begin with what the Quran, the holy book for Muslims, says about the acquisition of education for Muslims. Qurān prescribes education as compulsory for every man and women (Ali 1950). It is implied then that both sexes have equal right to access education (Rafeda al Hariri 1987). In the light of Quranic references the Prophet exhorted the Muslims to seek for ‘ilm’ (knowledge) even if they had to go to as far distant as China.
Also Muslims could obtain education from anybody. For example, in the battle of Badr, some enemies were captured at the end of the battle. The Prophet did not punish them; instead he asked the literate among them that each one of them should teach twelve Muslims (Iqbal 1977). A fable though it may sound but what it underpins is that the Prophet was neither opposed to nor had aversion in acquiring knowledge even from those not faithful to Islam. In nut shell neither the Quran nor the Hadith\(^2\) enjoin upon Muslims to refrain from acquiring modern education (Peer 1990). In fact, Muslims received knowledge from different countries and also contributed to different branches of knowledge including science (Arnold 1931; Levy 1962; Hitti 1971; Peacock 1978).

From the above discussion it can be reasonably inferred that there is nothing in Islamic theology as such that puts road blocks to the acquisition of knowledge for Muslims other than theological knowledge. Rather, Islam encourages its followers to acquire education.

Now let us turn to deal with the hypothesis under scrutiny in the Indian context. Did the Muslims during the colonial period really lag behind other communities in the sphere of education? If so, were they reluctant to take to modern education under the impression of Islam? A definitive answer to these questions perhaps cannot be claimed on account of the nature and amount of data available. However, some educational records, surveys and reports of colonial administration enable us to present an objective view of the educational status of Muslims. Table 3.1 and 3.2 present percentage shares of Muslim students to total students for the period 1871-72 and 1931-32 respectively.

Table 3.1: Percentage of Muslim Children Enrolled in Major Provinces of India, 1871-72

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>% of Muslims to total Population</th>
<th>% of Muslim Pupil to total Pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengal &amp; Assam</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West Province</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oudh</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British India</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Progress of Education in India, 1971-72*
Table 3.2: Percentage of Muslim Children Enrolled in Major Provinces of India, 1931-32

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>% of Muslims to total Population</th>
<th>% of Muslim Pupil to total Pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengal</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Province</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>50.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Province</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWFP</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British India</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: GOI, *Progress of Education in India, 1931-32*

Taken the Tables 3.1 and 3.2 together, the following observations can be made. First, the representation of Muslims in the new system of education introduced by the British varied remarkably from one province to another, if proportionality of Muslim students to total Muslim population could be considered a measure of fair representation. Second, during the period 1871-1931, Muslims made impressive gains in enhancing their presence felt in educational arena. In fact, by 1931, except for Bengal, Punjab and North West Frontier Province, the proportion of Muslim pupils was closer to or a little higher than the share of Muslims to total population. The reason for the poor representation of Muslims in education in Punjab and North-West-Frontier-Province was because this part of the country had agriculture as the mainstay of livelihood. Overwhelming majority of Muslims constituted an agriculture community for whom much of education that was being imparted was perhaps irrelevant (Basu 1974). In fact, this is true of any agricultural society. In Bengal, the observed under representation of Muslims in education was more due to poverty among the vast majority of Muslims than anything else (Seal 1968; Basu 1974)

Thus, a perusal of the brief analysis presented above together with some discussion in the earlier chapter suggests that the educational status of Muslims during the colonial period varied profoundly. While in one region or province they lagged behind in the sphere of education; they performed better than the others elsewhere. If in one or two provinces the share of Muslim pupils was not proportionate to or little short of the share of Muslim population to total
population it can not be claimed that Muslims as a community were educationally backward than the others and that their backwardness was more because of religious orthodoxy or cultural lag. Viewed thus, educational backwardness of Muslims during the British period was rather a myth than reality which was deliberately created to suit both the rulers and Muslim elites (Basu 1974).

In the post-independence period, until recently religion wise data on education were not available. The National Council for Applied Economic Research has indeed done a commendable job by providing religion wise data on education at state level. Drawing from these data and other available statistics, Kulkarni (2002) observed remarkable variation in the educational status of Muslims. Accordingly, while they are at par with or slightly behind Hindus in the Southern-Western region, there is a wide gap between the two communities in the Northern-Eastern states in matters of education. Given these findings if we assume even for the sake of argument that religious orthodoxy has played greater part in holding Muslims back in the sphere of education, we are faced with some very fundamental questions.

In the first place if religious orthodoxy can be held responsible for educational deficiency among the Muslims in the Northern-Eastern states what is it that explains good performance of the Muslims residing in the southern-western states? It can be argued that Muslims in the Southern-Western states might have responded to the processes of socio-economic development as positively as other social communities. But by the same token, it can also be argued that the dismal performance of Muslim communities in the northern and the eastern states, which are characterized by lower levels of socio-economic development in general (with a few exceptions), is rather due to general socio-economic backwardness than because of religious orthodoxy. Secondly, as the statistics reveal (NSS-1999-2000)\(^3\), among those who are educated, the difference between Hindus and Muslims is quite marginal, at least up till middle level. Beyond this stage, however, disparities get widened. Why almost equal representation at the lower levels of education and dismal performance at the upper levels? Do Muslims live under the impression that school education at elementary levels is fine, but higher education is not, as it might take their
children away from Islam or Islamic way of life? Or is it because after middle level Muslim children find it hard to pursue education or have low aspiration for higher education because of certain household characteristics?

To sum up the discussion in this section, in post-independence period, the educational status of Muslims at macro level unfolds broadly two distinctive regional patterns, i.e., northern-eastern and southern-western (Kulkarni 2002), which also unambiguously coincide with two distinctive patterns of socio-economic development of the country. In the Southern-Western states, which are relatively better developed performance of Muslims in matters of literacy and education is closer to Hindus while they lag behind Hindus in the underdeveloped context of Northern-Eastern states. It seems, therefore, reasonable to propose that religion is a dubious variable and is highly vulnerable to the effects of development. It can also be argued that the educational attainment among Muslims appears to be influenced more by their occupational and economic standing than their religious locations. In brief, it would be suffice here to state that explanation offered to account for the educational deprivation among Muslims either in the pre-independence or in the post-independence period by religious belief and cultural ethos has too many serious problems, which in turn appear to make the very hypothesis untenable.

Minority Complex

In India, the term minority is generally used to denote those non-Hindu religious communities whose members for one reason or the other assert their distinctiveness in relation to the Hindu community. Thus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis and Jews are commonly described as minorities in India (Ahmad 1987).

Minority status per se is not always associated with persistent educational deprivation. For example, in several situations, minority groups other than the Muslims like Christians, Sikhs and Parsis are ahead of the majority group of Hindus in terms of literacy and education. The basic assumption of the minority complex hypothesis is that schools are designed to recruit people into the labour market. People who are successful in school as well as in adult life become
success models and inspire parents in raising their children and getting them into school (Ogbu 1983). But when the opposite happens, i.e., when the members of minority groups are not recruited for one reason or the other, it might influence parents’ decision to send their children to schools negatively. Further, the existence of unequal power relation between majority and minority permits the dominant group to control minority access to both schooling and job (Ogbu 1983). That is to say, implicit or explicit practice of discrimination in labour market against members of minority community might make the minority community perceive that socio-economic mobility through education is not possible for them. This perception might prevent the minority community from investing in higher education which would affect the educational status of the community.

In the Indian context and for educational backwardness of Muslims, it is argued that the Muslim community has always been prone to discriminatory treatment. Muslims are the subject of employment discrimination in both the government sector and particularly severely in the private sector. Such discriminations are likely to lower the expected return to education for Muslims. It, therefore, follows that they (Muslims) do not concentrate on developing their talents by acquiring modern education. Thus, the reason for educational backwardness of Muslims is due to invidious discrimination against them in government jobs and in financial and legal matters (Gauba 1978; Habib 1976; Sexena 1983; Shahabuddin 1984; Muzammil 1994; Khalidi 1995).

Yet another argument couched in discrimination is the question of Urdu as a medium of instruction in school. Muslims at least in the North Indian context tend to report Urdu as their mother tongue. It is argued that due to withdrawal of Urdu as a medium of instructions from primary schools at least in Uttar Pradesh, many parents are reluctant to send their children, particularly daughters, to schools (Kamat 1981; Hamid 1987;).

**Critical Appraisal**

Does discriminatory perception among the Muslims hold them back in the sphere of education? It is true that the representation of Muslims in government jobs is
far less than their percentage share of total population. But, it is also true that very few Muslim students continue their education beyond schools, appear for and fare well in the competitive examinations for government jobs (Baig 1974; Kabir 1968; Saxena 1983). It can thus be argued that poor representation of Muslims in government jobs is largely due to educational deficiency, high drop-out rates, lack of sufficient motivations and family aspirations, unequal access to books and libraries which play greater part in getting government jobs.

Further, based on the findings of Kulkarni (2002), we have already mentioned that in the states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Kerala Muslims are closer to or slightly better than the Hindus in many indicators of educational attainment. If we assume for the sake of argument that discriminatory perception among Muslims has discouraged them to invest in education then the question which arises is: are Muslims in these states less or not at all prone to discrimination as compared to rest part of the country? The hypothesis under scrutiny further appears to be untenable when we find that Muslims alone are not the deprived segment of the population in terms of education; in fact, in a given context they share this deprivation with other disadvantaged social groups who are not categorized as minority. Thus, to say that actual discrimination or discriminatory perception emanating from minority status of the Muslims has militated against the educational participation of Muslims is just an oversimplification of a complex problem.

**Characteristics Hypothesis**

The exponents of characteristics hypothesis attribute the differential educational attainment among different segments of society to differing levels of socio-economic status thereof. The different socio-economic factors found to influence educational attainment include the educational and occupational status of the household heads, income of the households, family structure and so on (Morrish 1972; Muller;1972; Jamison and Lockheed 1985; Astone et al 1991;Warren 1996). In brief, the argument is that social demand for education varies in terms of social classes and hence education would not appeal to all social strata equally.
The educational status of a group of population will, therefore, largely depend upon the size of the strata that usually aspires for education.

The best exponent of the ‘characteristics hypothesis’ dealing with educational backwardness of Muslims is Imtiaz Ahmad, a noted sociologist and an authority on Muslim’s socio-economic affairs. In his work “Muslim Educational Backwardness: An Inferential Analysis” published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (1981) has tried to theorize under-representation of Muslims in educational sphere along the lines of socio-economic factors. He argues that much against the popular perception, Muslims do not constitute a monolithic community. Like other religious communities, Muslims are a class-segregated community and the size of middle strata among them, which usually goes in for education, is very small. Thus, according to him the educational backwardness of Muslims is the function of the small size of strata that values education and traditionally goes in for education.

At this juncture, at the risk of deviating, let us have a look at the socio-economic structure of the Muslim community.

*Muslim Social Structure*

Although Islam strictly prohibits caste practices (Levy 1962) yet Muslims are not immune to the caste like system among them. The social structure of Muslims with slight modification displays semblance with that of Hindu community. It is partly due to age-old direct contact with Hindus having rigid caste system (Ansari 1959; Srinivas et al 1959; Misra 1964; Dumont 1970) and partly due to the recruitment of intermediate and lower rungs of Hindu society to Islam wherein status was rigidly defined in terms of birth and maintained by strong social sanctions, which they might have imported with them at the time of conversion to Islam (Ahmad 1977; Ahmad 1978). Thus, much against the popular perception, Muslims do not constitute a homogeneous category. In fact, they are as much segmented a community on socio-economic and cultural plane as any other Indian social communities (Imam 1975; Ahmad 1975; Gupta 1984).

Broadly speaking, at least two broad categories could be identified on the basis of caste like groupings called *ashraf* and *ajlaf*. *Ashrafs* are high caste
people and claim to be descendent of the Prophet. On the other hand, *ajlafs* mostly constitute the low caste converts (Ahmad 1977; 1981).

**Economic Structure of Muslims**

Similarly, Muslims in India do not form a single economic entity and they cannot be placed under one specific category of professions. The fact remains that they are found in all sorts of occupations and income groups. However, there are certain occupations in which their bunching does happen. For example, a majority of Muslim community is self-employed and engaged in traditional occupations like weaving, metal works, leather processing, tailoring, artisans and so on (Rao and Tiwari 1979; Krishna 1982; Krishna 1983; Ahmad 1987; Tahir Beg 1989; Munshi 1989; Ansari 2001).

Table 3.3: Pattern of Employment by Religion in India, 1987-88

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residence/Sex and Religion</th>
<th>Self-Employed</th>
<th>Regular wage/Salaried</th>
<th>Casual Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban Males</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban Females</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural Males</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural Females</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Sample Survey, 43rd Round, 1987-88 (Schedule 10)

Table 3.3 also indicates that the proportion of Muslim population in self employment is larger and lesser in regular wage/salaried category than Hindus and Christians. Although it is very difficult to divide the Muslim community into different socio-economic strata and to delineate each stratum with some exactitude from the following data, by and large, at least four broad social strata based on occupation can be identified among Muslims. They include the upper
class, middle class, lower middle class and lower class (Ahmad 1981; Ansari 1960). Most often class hierarchy is reflected in caste hierarchy although few exceptions always exist (Mayer 1967).

Those who are at the lowest rung of caste hierarchy are also assumed to be at the bottom of economic scale or occupational structure. Seen in this light, the so-called ashrafs have usually belonged to the upper middle classes while the ajlafs have constituted the lower middle and lower classes. They are mostly found to be engaged in weaving, tailoring, butchery, barbery, laundry and other menial jobs. However, considerable degree of congruence and overlapping between them cannot be ruled out (Ahmad 1981).

In brief, as literature indicates, Muslims like Hindus exhibit a stratified community although it is not exactly patterned after the Hindu community. The Muslim community of India is broadly stratified along two axes — caste like grouping (although without the ascribed status) and occupation. There appears to be close correspondence between caste and occupation and the link is quite stronger in the lower rungs of the community.

The stratification among Muslims along the axes of caste like grouping and occupations is reflected in the stratification of education among them. For examples, ashrafs, who are economically better off than ajlafs have always been keen to get modern education (Seal 1969; Basu 1974). Jain (1969) in his study found positive correlation between educational aspirations and caste and class among Muslims like Hindus, that is lower caste and lower class lower educational aspiration and vice versa. How socio-economic structure of a population in general and of Muslims in particular is linked with educational attainment is presented in the following section.

Linkage between Socio-Economic Structure and Educational Attainment
It is well argued that education by large majority is not viewed as a form of consumption; rather as an investment that involves time, energy and resources. Any investment has to be transformed into return. Viewed thus, education is a productive investment (Schultz 1961) and contains functional value. It is,
therefore, logical to argue that when one invests in certain enterprise, uppermost in his or her mind would be the return, at least commensurate with investment. If the activity does not promise some good return hardly any one would go in for investment in such activity. There is a close association between occupation and education and vice versa (Swift 1968; Morrish 1972; Muller and Shavit 1998). Also social class is associated with differences in social networks, leisure time and child bearing activities (Lareau 1987). Thus in general the families' ability to invest in their children's education is limited by their social and economic resources. It, therefore, implies that education would not appeal to every one, every social group and strata equally.

Which social strata usually go in for education? A closer look at the history of education would sufficiently indicate that education has always demonstrated a class character. In traditional societies, few monopolized education – the upper class comprised of ruling and religious elite. In India, right from the beginning of literacy, education was closely associated with these two kinds of elites. Brahmin priests monopolized the knowledge of Vedic traditions. Along with the Brahmins, the ruling and merchant castes developed a secular culture including drama, poetry, a science of lovemaking and art (Srinivas 1955; Weber 1958; Thapar 1966; Collins 1977; King 1987). Similarly, in the Islamic world, education developed from religious training in the holy scriptures and remained confined to a few wealthy and status groups (McNeil 1963). In Europe too, education was held and exploited by the upper class and wealthy status groups.9

The expansion of complex commercial and administrative society with some dispersion of authority resulted in the rise of a class, which could have met the demand of the emerging modern society. In course of time this class developed its own culture, status symbol and distinctive pattern of goal attainment. Characterized by such distinctive traits, this class was given the appellation of 'Middle Class'.10 The middle class is found to attach higher value to education for a wide variety of reasons. For one thing, the middle class families are described as very conscious of their status and concerned with upward mobility. The chief concern of middle class families is that their children
should obtain qualifications sufficient to preserve their present class position or at very least, to guard against any decisive downward mobility (Goldthrobe 1996). Secondly, their aspirations are oriented to white collar occupations. To attain this they foster educational achievement as they see it as one of the most important channels through which middle class status can be ensured to their children (Sugarman 1966; Craft 1970). Thirdly, they are found to be child oriented and future oriented and interested in achievement and mobility (Herrot and St. John 1966; Silver 1973). Today the large scale bureaucratic organizations with their formal hierarchy and rules inevitably establish strict educational and training requirements for each position. In this changed socio-economic settings education becomes a prerequisite for success and is not as previously, simply an upper class luxury. Thus education is becoming a crucial determinant of one’s occupation and income, and hence one’s social class position. Middle class families are, therefore, concerned with career planning and place higher value on extended education (Roker 1993; Gerwitz et al 1995). Finally, middle class culture provides parents with more information about education and destinations, practical help and support and shares aspirations for higher levels of education (Lareau 1987). Thus there are a number of reasons why middle class families are keen to value and appropriate the benefit of extended schooling and why middle class children perform better than those of lower class. Seen in this light it can be concluded that the spread of education in any society is the function of the size of the middle strata thereof.

How big or small has been the size of middle strata among Muslims as compared to others is a very complex question and no authoritative statement is possible? In fact, the middle class stratum among Muslims has been smaller than other communities historically. In India, the emergence of middle class owes to the direct results of the establishment of new economic and administrative system, commercial and business organizations ushered in by the British rule (Seal 1969; Misra 1978; Singh 1985). Since the Presidencies were the first to be exposed to the economic and administrative system, they were, therefore, likely to take the lead in the formulation of Middle class. Except for Bengal, the social demography in the presidencies was such that there was vast disparity between
different social and religious communities in social situation. This in the final analysis led to uneven pattern of formation and development of middle class in different social communities. It was more biased against Muslims because Hindus were not only preponderant in number as against theirs but also had definite edge over in terms of social situation and orientation for the new employment opportunities. While, Muslims were mainly confined to occupation like agriculture, petty shop keepers, small trade and crafts (Ashraf 1975), which did not require exposure to education to any substantial extent, on the other hand Hindus constituted big land owners who not only adopted the new economic system but also took to modern education and harvested the benefits of it. Thus the vicious circle of lower occupation and lower aspiration for education encircled the Muslims in the Presidencies, which not only restricted the geographical spread of middle class but also caused delay in its becoming among them.

Further as Ashraf (1975) points out while the Hindus had already acquainted themselves with the modern life by 1857 and after the establishment of Universities in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, which led to springing up of middle class among Hindus, the Muslims of North India and their intelligentsia, unaware of industrialization and modern education were engaged till about 1857 in a general rebellion for restoring feudal lords. The social environment among Muslims underwent change when Syed Ahmad Khan had laid the foundation of modern education for Muslims. Thus “a middle class among Muslims came up half a century later than the Hindu middle class, but like a child born to aged parents. It began to grow up under the patronage of a dying a feudal order” (Ashraf 1975:50).

In brief, on the basis of the above account it can be assumed that the size of the middle strata among Muslims was very small during British rule and that this too shrunk and depleted in the wake of the partition of country. The partition caused unprecedented migration of Muslims to newly born Pakistan. Vast majority of migrants were, however, from urban centers and these urban migrants mainly consisted of the educated intelligentsia, service personnel, doctors and lawyers and those who stayed behind were artisans, craftsmen, small
businessmen and some clerical government employee (Imam 1975; Hasan 2000). In rural areas, although the zamindars, jagirdars and rich peasants stayed back, the agrarian reforms introduced just after the independence dealt a heavy blow to them. It is held that Muslim zamindars and jagirdars were more affected than the Hindu counterparts (Suhrawardy 1974; Rahmatullah 1974). All this further cut down the size of Muslim middle class. As a whole, the economic position of Muslims weakened considerably.

In the post-independence period and until very recently there were no valid statistics on economic status of religious group available. But with the help of available data it is very difficult to classify the community into different classes such as upper class, middle class, lower middle class and lower class. The latest data, however, indicates that the proportion among Muslims engaged in regular wage/salaried class is far smaller than that of Hindus (Shariff 1995: also Table-3.3). If the regular wage/salaried class could be considered as middle class, it then can be concluded with some amount of objectivity that the middle strata among Muslims is far smaller than other religious communities.

Now let us put the debate in a proper perspective. As we have already seen, majority of Muslims are agricultural laborers, marginal farmers and are engaged in traditional occupations like handicraft, carpet making, butchery, weaving and small shop keeping where education is not a necessary prerequisite for running them (Ahmad 1981). Further, these occupations have greater capacity to absorb family members as a result parents may not find education much relevant. Thus in a situation where aspirations are low, readily available employment avenues act as further deterrent to extended schooling. Aspirations apart, it is a rational action for those tied to traditional occupations to impart professional skills to their children in the professions running through generations instead of investing in education. It is because education is an enterprise which involves considerable amount of time, energy and available resources. When chances of gainful employment in educational system are quite low, in such a situation education for those who are tied to traditional occupations would essentially mean immediate loss of money and wanton waste of time and energy. Seen in this light, only those people would be attracted to education or would
make investment in this enterprise that could perceive the beneficial effects of
education or the return accruing from it (Ahmad 1981). It is observed in the
studies done by Jain (1969) and Jain (1986) that educational aspirations vary
among Muslims with different classes among them – very high among those
engaged in white collar job and high income group and very low among lower
income groups. In fact, it is true of any social community/social group as families
decide to take to education on some rational cost-benefit calculations. Thus the
educational backwardness of Muslims seems to be the function of small size of
the strata of middle class which usually goes in for education.

To sum up, educational backwardness of Muslims is deeply rooted in and
conditioned by wider social and economic structure. The extent to which
education develops in different social communities varies according to the social
strata that are supposed to exploit the available educational opportunities and
usually go in for education with the avowed purpose of entering into white-collar
occupations. These strata basically include the middle class and the middle class
is perceived to be more concerned with education than other strata. Muslims in
India like any other social communities is a class-segregated community.
Historically, the size of the middle strata among the Muslims has been very
small. It further depleted following the partition. In the post independence period,
its expansion seems to have shown remarkable persistence, which needs deeper
inquiry. As a consequence, as the hypothesis suggests, the spread of education
among Muslims has been relatively at a slower pace, which largely account for
their educational backwardness. It may be proposed, however, that a widening of
middle class amongst Muslim may have a positive impact on the educational
status of Muslims. Seen in this light, when one talks about the educational
backwardness of Muslims (or for that matter of any community), the reference is
generally to the lower strata and the reluctance to education would be determined
by the size of such a strata thereof. Unfortunately, the size of this stratum among
Muslims is relatively large. That is why when one compares the absolute figures
of education among Muslims and other religious communities, the whole
community appears to stand deprived, which is quite misleading. And yet, the
circularity of the argument cannot be missed, i.e., a relatively larger lower strata
not aspiring for educational attainment in any remarkable manner on one hand and because their educational aspirations are generally lower the prospects of broadening the middle strata (essentially propelled by upward economic mobility) are relatively slimmer.

Coming back to the characteristics hypothesis, although it seems convincing yet it is not statistically proved. White (1982) and Fejgin (1995) in their study found that socio-economic factors did not account for all the variations in educational attainment between racial and ethnic groups. Further the responses of the two groups even after controlling for socio-economic endowments could be different as actually is the case in the present study.

In sum, the three hypotheses offered to explain the educational backwardness among Muslims do not provide definitive answers to the problem. So far as particularized theology hypothesis is concerned, it is merely an assumption at least in the context of Indian Muslims. Minority hypothesis too, if it does, explains tiny part of the picture. The characteristics hypothesis to some extent seems to be convincing in explaining the problem, yet it largely remains a hypothesis and so far has not been subjected to scientific inquiry. In brief, the explanations proffered so far need to be subjected to critical examination.

A point that emerged quite repeatedly in the earlier discussion is that Muslims are not monolithic category. To this may be added another dimension which is equally important in placing Muslims' educational backwardness in a perspective. It may be recalled that Kulkarni and others have forcefully argued that regional locations make a difference as to how Muslims would behave in terms of socio-economic and demographic matters. This is because no community can/would function in contextual isolation- the context provided by locational specificities of larger milieu. Muslims in Kerala vis-à-vis Muslims in Uttar Pradesh is a very apt example. To quote the well-known analyst Engineer (2004)

"There is, for example, higher rate of literacy among the Kerala Muslims than Muslims in other regions. Even the rate of family planning among the Kerala Muslims is higher than the Muslims, say in U.P. or Maharashtra. Similarly, the Ansari Muslims in Eastern U.P. are better off
economically than other Muslims in the region. In general the artisans, Ansaris, Qureshis, Baghbans and others have made more progress economically than upper caste Muslims. In the same manner the Bohras, Khojas and Memons of Gujarat being trading communities, are much better off than Muslims in general. Thus it will be seen that regional and even sectarian and caste differences must be taken into account while trying to understand the situation of Indian Muslims.

What is being said is that in addition to internal differentiation, one need to ask where these communities- Hindus and Muslims reside? In other words, spatial locations impart specificities that might intercept some of the hypothesized constructs in ways which remain unexplained in conventional discourses. A stylized model of proposed framework is included alongside (Figure 3.1)

Figure 3.1: Stylized Presentation of Theoretical Framework

To conclude, what is required in the context of educational backwardness is placing the discussions/debates in wider demographic and socio-economic context and look for nuances and complexities (Nagar and Raju 2003).

Notes

1 The term ‘Particularized Theology’ is borrowed from studies dealing with religious differential in fertility

2 The term hadith refers to a tradition of the Prophet, a report about some saying or action of him, which, if recognized to be authentic, is considered to be fundamental source of law. Its authority, however is subordinate to an injunctions contained in Quran.

3 Please refer to chapter-1, in which educational status of both Hindus and Muslims by rural and urban is discussed based on the statistics provided by National Sample Survey, 55th round, Report No.468, 1999-2000

4 The word ‘minority’ is a highly contested term. However, according to United Nations sub-Commission on Prevention of the Discrimination and Protection defines minority as ‘those non-dominant groups in a population, which possesses and wish to preserve stable ethnic, religious or linguistic traditions or characteristics markedly different from those of the vast population.’ The Constitution of India recognizes two types of minority based on language and religion (Ghurye 1968). That is to say, only linguistic and religious minority is constitutionally recognized.
Although the Urdu language was born in India and spoken by a large section of both Hindus and Muslims in North India, the language since partition of the country carries the stigma of being the language of Muslims. As a result, it has lost the support of non-Muslims in favour of it, which has undermined its synthetic character (Ahmad 2002). Thus Urdu in general is recognized as the language of Muslim minority.

N.C Saxena (1983) has done a commendable job in collating vast information on the share of Muslims in government jobs as well as in public and private sectors for various states. He has also gathered information on the participation and performance of Muslim students in various competitive examinations.

The ‘characteristics hypothesis’ has been borrowed from studies on religious differential in fertility. According to this hypothesis fertility level of a group or sub group of population is the function of socio-economic characteristics thereof. See Sydney, G (1969).

The term ‘ashraf’ is the plural form of ‘sharif’ and used to denote the group among Muslims claiming to be the descendent of the Prophet. See Levy, R (1962). In India, ashrafs include Sayyed, Seikh, Mugal and Paithan – four groups of foreign extraction. On the other hand, the term ‘ajif’ is used to describe converts from lower Hindu caste. However, according to Imtiaz Ahmad (1978) ashraf denotes more an esteemed life style than caste.

The term ‘status group’ as defined by Max Weber is based on a common culture that provides a consciousness of membership (and hence of the boundaries with non-members) and usually some claim to prestige and legitimacy in the social order. See Max Weber, Economy and Society.

A distinction is usually made between ‘old’ and ‘new’ middle class. The old middle class is distinguished from new middle class in that while the former comprised of entrepreneurs, company owners and property owners, the latter is a heterogeneous group of white collar employees including salaried professionals and technical workers (such as teachers, social workers and engineers), managers (but not owners) at all levels, sales people in and out of stores, and clerical and office workers of all kinds. For details see C. Wright Mills (1956). In Indian context, for details see Misra, B.B (1978) and Singh, Gurchain (1985).