

MUSLIM WOMEN AND MADRASA EDUCATION: PROBLEMS, CHALLENGES, AND AN UNFULFILLED DREAM OF EQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on Muslim women's education in Indian madrasas through the intersecting realities of gender, religion, class, and marginality. For many girls, madrasas are spaces of faith and belonging, and often the only accessible form of education. Yet they also impose limits. Narrow curricula, patriarchal expectations, economic hardship, and isolation from the formal system shape their learning and restrict their mobility and choices. The participation of women remains limited, and advanced religious scholarship—such as becoming an Aalima—is still achieved by relatively few. At the same time, small but meaningful changes are emerging. Some madrasas are introducing modern subjects, digital literacy, and vocational skills, opening pathways that allow Muslim women to imagine lives beyond traditionally prescribed roles. These shifts offer hope, but remain uneven and constrained by larger structural barriers. Drawing on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of education as a tool for equality and dignity, this article is based on secondary sources, it highlights the gap between constitutional ideals and lived realities, arguing that true empowerment requires deeper, inclusive transformation in education.

KEYWORDS: *Madrasa Education, Graded Inequality, Intersectionality, Curricular Reform, Substantive Equality.*

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Introduction

In India, equality and justice often feel like promises written in law but not fully practiced in everyday life. Every individual's experiences are shaped by the intersection of religion, gender, and class. While the Constitution speaks of equality and secularism, many still face barriers in demand oriented-education, mobility, and opportunity. These inequalities are not accidental-they are rooted in history, including colonial laws that separated personal identities within legal systems, creating a lasting tension between gender justice and religious autonomy (From Subjects to Citizens). Legal moments have brought attention to address the struggles, but change remains slow and uneven. In this reality, education becomes more than learning. Most importantly there is lack of skill-based education which has to give the assured employment opportunities whether it is through religious or formal education. Inspired by B. R. Ambedkar's belief that education is a pathway to dignity and empowerment, this article reflects on how unequal access can either confine individuals within imposed boundaries or enable them to rise beyond them. As he emphasized: "Let every girl who marries stand by her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal, and refuse to be his slave." (B. R. Ambedkar)

Madrasa Education: Structure and Gendered Access

Madrasas in India are diverse, but most emphasize religious instruction, including Quranic studies, Hadith (Practices of the Prophet Mohammad), and Islamic jurisprudence (Islamic Education in India). In other words they are religious schools dedicated for imparting religious education. Although Muslim female participation has increased in education in recent past, it remains uneven and often limited in scope. In many cases, girls' madrasas focus primarily on basic religious education while also reinforcing domestic roles, thereby reproducing existing gender hierarchies (Engineer, 2001). This pattern reflects Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's concept of "graded inequality," where inclusion exists but is structured hierarchically (Ambedkar, 1936). Access to education is present, yet it does not translate into equal opportunities for intellectual, social, or economic advancement. In madrasas girls are not supposed to go outside and do the work of imparting lectures or spreading the

messages of Prophet. They are supposed to be there all the time which sometimes can bring the feelings of force or domination among girls. Such stratification restricts women's engagement with broader forms of knowledge and limits their access to diverse career pathways. As a result, educational experiences remain bounded, constraining their participation in public life, and illustrating how institutional structures can simultaneously enable access while sustaining inequality.

Key Problems and Challenges

The challenges facing Muslim women in madrasa education are multiple and interconnected, shaped by structural, cultural, and economic constraints (Islamic Education in India). A key issue is curricular limitation, such as the limited inclusion of modern and mainstream subjects restricts intellectual development and employability. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasized that the cultivation of the mind is central to human progress, while Martha Nussbaum (2000) similarly highlights the importance of education in developing critical reasoning and autonomy. The absence of such integration within many madrasa curricula limits women's capabilities and future opportunities. Another significant challenge is the persistence of patriarchal norms that shape educational participation. Social practices such as early marriage, restricted mobility, and the prioritization of domestic responsibilities often disrupt continuity in education (Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens Chakravarti, 2003). As Ambedkar argued, the progress of a community is closely tied to the progress of its women; however, these constraints continue to limit access to sustained learning. It is disheartening that Institutional marginalization further deepens these inequalities, as madrasas largely remain outside mainstream educational frameworks, often lacking standardized curricula, infrastructure, and consistent state support. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) highlights that Muslim women face compounded disadvantages shaped by both gender and community identity, reinforcing patterns of social exclusion. Economic constraints also play a significant role. Poverty limits educational choices and contributes to higher dropout rates, particularly among girls. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasized that political democracy must rest on social and economic democracy, suggesting that without material empowerment, educational equality

remains incomplete. Additionally, the lack of representation within madrasa governance structures sustains exclusionary decision-making. When women's voices are absent, institutional priorities often fail to address their specific needs and concerns. As Hasan (2012) argues, representation is central to achieving substantive equality, aligning with Ambedkar's broader democratic vision.

Dr. Ambedkar's Perspective

Dr. Ambedkar's vision of equality goes beyond formal legal equality and emphasizes substantive social equality in lived realities. He cautioned that "without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many" (Ambedkar, 1945: 302), highlighting the danger of unequal social structures even within democratic systems. In the context of madrasa education, unequal access and limited opportunities for Muslim women reflect this imbalance, where formal inclusion does not necessarily translate into substantive empowerment. For Ambedkar, fraternity signifies a deeper form of social solidarity that transcends divisions of caste, religion, and gender and forms the moral foundation of a democratic society. The continued exclusion or marginalization of Muslim women within educational structures undermines this principle of fraternity by reinforcing social separation and hierarchical relations. His critique of hierarchical social order in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and his moral and ethical vision in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957) together provide a comprehensive framework for reimagining educational justice. These works collectively stress that true democracy requires the dismantling of structural inequalities and the creation of conditions where equality and fraternity are meaningfully realized in education and society.

Bridging the Gap: Towards Inclusive Reform

Bridging the gap between formal educational access and substantive equality for Muslim women in madrasa education requires a multi-dimensional and integrated approach. Equality not in the matter of gender equality only but equality in all the fields, whether it may be a religious or modern educational fields. Curricular reform is essential, particularly through the inclusion of modern subjects such as science, mathematics, and digital literacy, which can significantly enhance women's capabilities and expand

their opportunities beyond traditional religious roles (Nussbaum, 2000). Alongside this, gender-sensitive policies are necessary to address institutional biases by restructuring madrasa governance and pedagogy in ways that reduce gender inequality and promote inclusive learning environments (Chanana, 2004). Community engagement also plays a crucial role, as sustainable change depends on internal reform processes that critically address entrenched patriarchal norms and social practices restricting women's educational participation (Engineer, 2001). In addition, state intervention remains vital in strengthening institutional support, funding, and regulatory frameworks aimed at improving the quality and reach of minority education (Government of India 2006). Finally, meaningful representation of Muslim women in decision-making and governance structures within educational institutions is indispensable for ensuring that policies reflect their lived realities and needs, thereby advancing substantive equality and social justice (Hasan, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion we can reiterate that due to socio-economic and cultural factors most of the Muslims are sending their daughters to nearby Madarasa. There is no checks and balances about the nature and quality of education being imparted in these religious schools. Whatever religious gurus teach in these schools, girls simply memorize the Quranic verses without knowing the real meaning of the Quran. The condition of Muslim women in madrasa education reflects intersecting inequalities of gender, class, and community. While access has improved, substantive equality remains unrealized due to structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. There is an urgent need to integrate these madarasa with general education and special skills required for modern day life. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of equality and fraternity offers a critical framework for understanding and addressing these inequalities. His emphasis on education as a form of emancipation underscores the need for inclusive and transformative educational structures. Ultimately, achieving educational justice for Muslim women requires not only policy reform but also deeper social transformation grounded in constitutional morality.

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