

Maulana Azad's Vision of Education:

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Sachar Committee has well documented the educational backwardness among Muslims at all levels – literacy rates are much below the national average, dropout rates are higher among the Muslims and therefore, their numbers in graduation and post graduation are much lower. Various reasons are being attributed for this backwardness, however, the varied analyses emanate from basically two perspectives. The first perspective blames either Islam as a religion which is against secular education or blames Muslims as a community for lack of interest in getting their children to schools. While the second perspective takes a closer look at the structure of the education system that tends to keep the minorities, dalits, adivasis outside the system. The first perspective is pushed by people with communal attitudes or subscribed by those who form quick and lazy opinions. While the second perspective is subscribed to by educationists, or those who are engaged with the problem of educational backwardness.

Reasons for educational backwardness among Muslims:

Poverty is the biggest contributing factor behind the educational backwardness among the Muslims. There is great diversity among the Muslim community along linguistic and regional lines, sectarian lines and caste *biradaries*. Those Muslim *biradaries* or communities that enjoy higher incomes, are educationally more forward. The Bohras, Khojas and Memons for example, are more forward than, say, mehtars (scavengers), *bagwans* or *telis*. Upwardly mobile *biradaries* like Ansaris and Qureshi have increasingly taken towards educating their children and some of them are doing well and even becoming professionals. The awareness and thirst for education has particularly increased after the demolition of Babri Masjid and the riots that followed the demolition. Education is seen as key to secured jobs and professions that cannot be destroyed during riots. Muslim girls have been topping in SSC and HSC exams. The image of a domestic worker arguing with the principal of a convent school with high fees to admit her child when we had gone for a fact finding mission is still fresh in my mind. She told the principal that she would forgo her meal one time and undertake extra work to pay the fees of the school but not to keep her child out of the school gates.

Poor Muslim families are forced to send their children for earnings or apprenticeship so that s/he can start supporting the family. There is high rate of child labour among Muslims in zardosi, carpet, bangles and other industries. Many Muslim children have high skills, but no formal training and no certificates, which forces them to remain on low survival incomes lifelong. Low income means the next generation too would be labourers. There is no inter-generational asset transfer and the community continues to decline. Communal violence ensures that the meagre assets generated through hard work get destroyed without adequate compensation and without rehabilitation of the victims. Some members of the tiny middle class within the community slip into poverty and doing small odd jobs when their small trade or business is destroyed in violence. About 75-80% of Muslim families live off labouring jobs.

Muslims are forced into ghettos on the outskirts of towns and cities or rural areas.. These ghettos have poor infrastructure like approach roads, adequate water, sewerage, electric connections, banking institutions and educational institutions. Lack of schools within ghettos leave the option of seeking admission in schools that are far away increasing the cost of education and in cases of lack of proper approach roads, making it even more difficult. Schools situated far away from Muslim ghettos also increase the security risk, particularly after communal violence and for girl students. Parents in such situations withdraw their children from school leading to high dropout rates. Sachar Committee Report (SCR) finds that higher the proportion of Muslims in a given locality, poorer is the infrastructure in the locality. There is inverse relation between the proportion of Muslims in a given locality and the infrastructure that has been provided by the state.

The fourth reason is discriminatory attitude of school managements towards Muslim children at the time of admission. Ghettos also exist in our minds, which often informs us that Muslims should study in Urdu medium schools, even though Urdu is not their mother tongue. They are less preferred as common attitudes are that they would not be able to do so well in their studies or continue. Alien environment in the schools, which include imposition of religious prayers that are against the creed of Islam and rituals like Saraswati Vandana, teaching of Geeta, surya namaskar and other such rituals dissuade Muslim children from continuing their education.

Last but not least, Muslims are less represented in all walks of life, including in political processes. Often they are less than one-third the number warranted by their proportion in population. Needy parents have no one to approach to or seek guidance and testimonies from. Good schools under the Muslim management are too few and far between. Muslim trusts wanting to establish educational institutions are not readily helped by the state by allotting land or coming forth with grant-in-aid or even for granting recognition. The community is least networked and it lacks social capital which is necessary for promotion of education among the community.

The problem lies with the nature of political leadership of the community as well. The political leadership of the community represents the interests of the upper-caste converts, or *ashrafs* and the tiny section of upper-middle class. It is more engaged on issues of identity and resisting any change in the Shari'a laws even within Quranic framework. The political leadership find a sympathetic ear within the corridors of power in perpetuating the medieval interpretation of Shari'a laws and Islamic jurisprudence which is discriminatory towards women and against Quranic spirit. Having sympathetic ear on the issue of Muslim Personal Laws helps the political leadership gain legitimacy. The political leadership of the community with honourable exceptions has not emphasised the issue of promotion of education or addressed livelihood issues of the community.

There are too few good primary and secondary educational institutions mostly in urban areas and members of Muslim community are less preferred and not inclusive enough. The Indian state too has realized that India cannot really progress if a large section of its population remains backward and uneducated. Therefore Sachar Committee was appointed and some half hearted measures have been taken like the PM's New 15 point programme which partly attempts to address only one of the problems listed above – poverty. The programme includes provision of

scholarships, hostel facilities, education loans and merit-cum-means scholarships. But the programme faces triple jeopardy – lack of adequate funds, lack of motivation among bureaucracy and lack of proper policy to address real problems of the community. Due to lack of space, we are not going into the details of the causes of failure of the programme to promote education. Poverty is only one small cause that the state however inadequately attempted to address. The net result is low figures in achievement on educational front.

Maulana Azad's vision on education:

If Maulana Azad had succeeded in persuading the Indian State to adopt his policies, the scenario would have been different today. For him, appropriate education policy of independent India was even more important than the industrial policy. Maulana Azad, being the first education minister of the independent India wanted to lay a strengthen and democratize our education system. He worked for democratizing of education in order to universalize achievement and thereby break the dominating structure of hegemonic hierarchies of caste and class. His 4 objectives were

- 1) Removal of illiteracy through universalization of elementary education up to secondary level and drive for adult education, including education for women
- 2) Equalizing educational opportunities in Indian society regardless of caste, community and class
- 3) Three language formula
- 4) Sound primary education throughout the country

Azad viewed “Every individual has a right to an education that will enable him to develop his faculties and live a full human life. Such education is the birth right of every citizen. A state cannot claim to have discharged its duty till it has provided for every single individual the means to the acquisition of knowledge and self-betterment.” ... “regardless of the question of employment the state must make available to all citizens the facilities of education up to the secondary stage.”

For Maulana Azad, education was a crucial tool to inculcate the citizenship among the people who just emerged from colonial rule and hierarchical structures like caste and gender. Citizens needed to imbibe the values of equality and needed to be sensitized on the religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity of the country. In order to achieve universal primary and secondary education, according to Maulana Azad, India needed to allocate at least 10% of its budget for education. The allocation for education in budget was at best 6% and often times, merely 2 to 3%. Maulana Azad wanted a substantial portion of the educational budget to be spent on primary and secondary education and adult education, including women. This would mean expanding and strengthening schooling in every village and *kasba* and equal access to all – Hindus or Christians or Muslims. The schools in India would teach values of equality and justice, and sensitize the younger generation to the diversity. Maulana Azad laid emphasis on teaching of values drawn from all religions.

The Indian state not only gave less importance to education, but substantial portion of its budget on education was allocated to creation of higher institutions like IITs, IIMs, AIIMS, JNU and the rest, mostly based in the four metros and accessible to relatively richer class who could afford costly tuitions in competitive entrance examinations in English language and after schooling in expensive public schools. The doors of these elite institutions were not entirely closed to those from poorer backgrounds and marginalized sections like the SCs, the STs, the OBCs, women and minorities but the barriers were so high that these section entering these institutions was more of an exception rather than rule. Expenditure on these islands for elite education was at the cost of expansion of primary and secondary school networks.

Conclusion:

Islam lays much emphasis on education. According to Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah, Ibn Abbas narrated that the Messenger of Allah (SAW) said: "A single scholar of religion is more formidable against shaytaan (the devil) than a thousand devout persons". The first and most crucial obligation on Muslims is to acquire knowledge and secondly to practice, teach and preach this knowledge. No man becomes a true Muslim without knowing the meaning of Islam, because he becomes a Muslim not through birth but through knowledge and deed. Islam lays emphasis on rationality. However, the Muslim religious and political leadership has ignored this obligation. Perhaps Maulana Azad was inspired by his understanding of Islam in spreading knowledge and education.

Education is one instrument that can help members of a community to take part and contribute meaningfully to the collective social life of the community. Education helps imbibe values necessary for harmonious and peaceful collective life, as well as for the environment and nature, for the development of frontiers of knowledge and new understanding. Education can help us to be better informed of our long term and sustainable interests, i.e. enlightened self-interests. Education can also help us build and develop skills that are necessary for livelihood and to contribute to the community.

Education is a continuous process in the life of all individuals. We get educated through our struggles for survival, interaction with other human beings; through interaction with nature and through varied experiences. Some minimum education is acquired by all individuals from the family and the members of extended family and community. However, meaningful education takes place through institutions of learning, like – schools, colleges, research institutes, universities, seminaries, institutions imparting professional and vocational knowledge and skills. Access to quality education, professional courses and higher education is always limited to privileged elite. It is the structure of education system in India that has not included Muslims and at the same time laying the blame on the community. If we do pursue the dreams of Maulana Azad, the whole nation would be benefited. Let us pursue the dream with urgency.