

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Education has a vital role to play in the socio-economic life of the people. A discussion on the socio-economic changes took place in Kanyakumari district in general, and all over the Muslim community in particular, and also on Muslim female education and their empowerment in Kanyakumari district. In the Kanyakumari district, the Muslim population has converted mostly from the backward classes of people. The reason that can be attributed to the lower literacy rate among the Muslims at par with the Christians can be attributed to the Missionaries, whose vision and mission helped the Christians to rise amidst all odds in life. The spread of Modern education has brought social reforms among the Muslims of Kanyakumari district against the superstitious beliefs and practices that prevailed among them in the name of religion. The social and historical factors speak about the Muslims' attitude towards modern education based on religious grounds, and the Muslims of Kanyakumari district were not an exception to this. Regarding the socio-economic changes as a sequel to the spread of Modern education among the Muslims of Tamil Nadu, especially of Kanyakumari district, a very useful comparative analysis of the conditions present some 50 years ago with the conditions prevailing now has been made. As far as the economic changes are concerned, the spread of education has had its special impact. Even though the Muslims of Kanyakumari district are economically backward but when compared with their previous

condition, they are in a better status now; this credit goes to the spread of education among them only. The planned economic development envisaged an all-around socio-economic progress without showing disparity to anybody. However, gender inequality and gender bias continue to exist in society, especially in the Muslim community. The elites of the Kanyakumari district should take efforts to bring them into the mainstream of education.

KEY WORDS

Education - Socio-economic - Muslim community – Christians - Missionaries – Backward – Development – Superstitious - Modern education – Mainstream - Gender inequality.

Introduction:

Education is the cornerstone upon which the entire structure of action and thought of a nation is based. The society is claimed to be more civilized only when it has literary development. Islam recognized the extraordinary significance of education. Education has a vital role to play in the socio-economic life of the people. A discussion on the socio-economic changes took place in Kanyakumari district in general, and all over the Muslim community in particular, and also on Muslim female education and their empowerment in Kanyakumari district. In a plural society such as that of India, the district generally faces demands from various castes, tribal, religious, and gender groups for social Justice. Amongst such groups in Kanyakumari district, the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes are treated as deserving castes for concessions for historical reasons, and on this, a national consensus has emerged.

Next to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, the most deserving group of people deserving such concessions is Muslims, because of their educational and economic backwardness. Amongst the population of Kanyakumari district, 15 to 20 per cent of people

are living below the poverty line in other than the Muslim community, whereas in the Muslim community, nearly 50 per cent of the people are living below the poverty line. In the Kanyakumari district, the Muslim population has converted mostly from the backward classes of people. The reason that can be attributed to the lower literacy rate among the Muslims at par with the Christians can be attributed to the Missionaries, whose vision and mission helped the Christians to rise amidst all odds in life. The people who converted to Islam or to Christianity belonged to the same Indian stock. There are no such missionary activities as found in the Christian community in the Muslim community to uplift their creed. Those missionaries not only educated them but also made the Christians follow the culture and style of living of the Englishmen. But Muslims had a strong aversion to the English education because of the fear psychosis that this education may teach them activities against their religious faith and fervour. If there had been such activities of the missionaries among the Muslim community, then it would have been a major turn among the Muslims, and the literacy rate would have surely increased, as it has in the Christian community. Therefore, the Muslims' educational and economic development should be placed at par with social Justice Groups. Generally, education has its social and economic significance. Any society, however backward, always possesses some scientific knowledge and technical advancement.

Spread of Modern Education:

The spread of education among the Muslim youth has broadened their social outlook, and we can see more young people engaging themselves in social service activities. For example, a charity endowment, namely 'Baithulmal', has been established by the educated youth of Kanyakumari district working in foreign countries to help the poor people of Kanyakumari district. They collect 'Jakkath' (religious tax) and alms from the Muslims working in foreign countries and rich people and distribute it among the poor people. They also extend interest-free loans to needy people. This kind of endowment is also established in

more parts of Tamil Nadu. The spread of Modern education has brought social reforms among the Muslims of Kanyakumari district against the superstitious beliefs and practices that prevailed among them in the name of religion. For example, previously, the Muslims of Kanyakumari district kept themselves aloof from the rest of the Muslims of Tamil Nadu in marriage alliances and intermingling. They strictly follow the Shafi school of thought and do marriages among themselves only. The educated youth of this town has broken this barrier and do marriages outside and with people of other schools of thought. Moreover, the Muslims of Kanyakumari district followed unnecessary and un-Islamic rituals during their marriage ceremony, and the marriages were held for three consecutive days. These practices have disappeared now because of the efforts taken by the educated youth of this place. This sort of enlightenment, inquisitive mind, and questioning the unreasonable practices are developed in them because of their growth of literacy growth. The most appreciable social change brought by the Modern education is the literacy of women of the Muslim community. Some twenty or twenty-five years back, it was very rare to see a girl with an eighth standard qualification. An educated young female generation with a scientific and rational approach towards day-to-day life has emerged now. A social awareness about education has developed among the Muslim women of Kanyakumari district.

Attitude towards Modern Education:

The social and historical factors speak about the Muslims' attitude towards modern education based on religious grounds, and the Muslims of the Kanyakumari district were not an exception to this. The objective of a young Hindu was to obtain education, which would fit him for a Government job or a professional career, whereas a young Muslim, on the other hand, was not allowed to turn his mind to the secular institution until he had acquired sacred learning of the Quran. Therefore, a Muslim boy enters school later than the Hindu boy. But this practice among the Muslims was modified by the efforts taken by the elites and the

educationists of the society. This is a turning point in the educational development of the Muslims. Educational development of the Muslim women in Kanyakumari district has not only given shape to their political, socio-economic, and cultural institutions, but also moulded their character and outlook on life. The introduction of Modern Education in Kanyakumari district effected revolutionary changes in the socio-economic and political life of people. It brought rationalistic ideas and non-religious values among the Indian masses. The introduction of western medical service, population control, growth of technical education, industrial development, agricultural development, and growth of trade and commerce were some of the benefits of the introduction of modern education in India. It checked the backward ideas of the conservative and orthodox Hindu and Muslim people. The changes effected due to the introduction of modern education among the Hindus apply to the Muslims also, except for one or two exemptions. The very introduction of modern education was a revolutionary one because it was introduced against the will of the Ulema and the conservative Muslims. It put an end to the domination of the Ulemma in the socio-economic and educational activities, opened new vistas of life, and initiated modernisation in the life of the Muslims. Regarding the socio-economic changes as a sequel to the spread of Modern education among the Muslims of Tamil Nadu, especially of Kanyakumari district, a very useful comparative analysis of the conditions present some 50 years ago with the conditions prevailing now has been made.

Social Changes:

First of all, the spread of modern education has brought an appreciable change in the lifestyle and status of the Muslims of Kanyakumari district, contrary to that of the prevailing three decades ago. Their dress and manners got refined. One could see the difference between an educated Muslim and an illiterate Muslim in their way of approach and behaviours. The Muslims of this locality, both women and men, used to wear lungies as their common dress.

Now these lungies were replaced by modern dresses like Pants and Chudidars. Even the purdah system has received a modification. Women used to wear a very big white cloth as a purdah, which was the most uncomfortable one. Now they are using modern 'burkhas', which are comfortable long coats. As a result of their progress in education and improved economic conditions, the Kanyakumari district Muslims began to derive the utility of modern household things and equipment. The recent survey conducted by a social welfare organization, which is running a Matriculation school, reveals that nearly 41 percent of the families have a Telephone facility, 46 percent of the houses have Televisions and 28 percent of the houses have Fridge facilities, and 8 percent of the families have computers at their homes. The data collected reveals that the above-mentioned facilities are found with families of good educational background. The spread of Modern education has increased the average marriage age of Muslim boys and girls. Previously, girls got married at the age of fifteen or sixteen, and boys at the age of twenty. Now, the educated girls and boys do marry only after their studies, at the age of twenty and twenty-six, respectively. Because of their education, the young generation of Kanyakumari district received enlightenment regarding male and female relationships. As a consequence, the dowry evil has considerably declined. An educated girl is more preferred than an uneducated girl in the marriage market. Some twenty or twenty-five years back, the Muslim parents considered that it was a sin to send their daughters to schools and Colleges after attaining the age of puberty. Now this opinion has tremendously changed; most of the parents are sending their daughters to schools and colleges for learning. Now only they have only understood that an educated woman could look after her family in a better way than an uneducated woman. Once, the Muslims of Kanyakumari district thought that the religious education (Madarasa education) alone was enough for their children. This attitude has changed now; they have realized the indispensability of modern education and sending their daughters to educational institutions even outside their locality.

Muslim women have begun to involve themselves in political and administrative fields, which is mainly due to the spread of education among them. In the survey conducted by the researcher, several Muslim women enthusiastically expressed that their lives became more meaningful after getting an education. They also said that wide propagation through educational conferences and seminars to be conducted to help the Muslim women understand the importance of education. For a long time, the Muslims had a wrong notion of the Family planning scheme of the government. The educational progress has made them understand the advantages of small family norms, and nowadays they are cooperating and at the same time not deviating from the Islamic principles with the government.

Religious Changes:

Even though Islam is a rational religion, somehow or other irrational beliefs and practices crept into the Muslim community in the name of religion. 'Dargha' (tomb of saints) worshiping cult is one of such un-Islamic practices developed among the Muslims. This Dargha cult is against the monotheism of Islam. This practice is very common in the Kanyakumari district. As a result of the spread of Modern education, scientific thinking and right religious understanding have sprung up among the educated youth, and they began to question the authenticity of the Dargha cult. Because of the opposition raised by the educated masses and well-learned religious scholars, nowadays the Dargha worship is getting unpopular among the Muslims. Tamil Nadu Thouhit Jamath, led by P.Jainul Abdin, an Aalim (religious scholar), and Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam, led by Professor Zawahirullah, are the two parties with their well-educated followers vehemently working for the above-mentioned cause.

They have successfully drawn the attention of the political parties and the State Government towards them and their demands. Muslim women are not given the proper guidance and knowledge about their rights in Islam. All these rights are in theory, because the

man decides the way the woman has to lead her life. She is not aware of the rights that Islam has endowed her with. She is kept in darkness and ignorance. But according to Islam, the rights and responsibilities of both sexes are equitable and balanced in their totality. Islam wishes to produce a woman who is not only independent in personality, but also one who does not feel deficient, because she is a female. Islam seeks to develop the personality, which gives women the confidence, security, and esteem to deal with men as equals without having to play to their gallery or aspire to behave like them.

Economic Changes:

As far as the economic changes are concerned, the spread of education has had its special impact. Even though the Muslims of Kanyakumari district are economically backward but when compared with their previous condition, they are in a better status now; this credit goes to the spread of education among them only. Most of the Muslims in the Kanyakumari district are engaged in trading activities. Besides this, the Muslims are seeking their fortunes in foreign countries, mostly as petty shopkeepers and menial servants. Government jobs were not preferable among the Muslims of the Kanyakumari district. Apart from this majority of the Muslim people are working in hotels and other industries as labourers. In coastal areas, the Muslims also engage themselves in the fishing profession. Due to their poverty, the Muslims even work on a daily wage basis and do all sorts of work. Some 30 years back, illiteracy was widespread among the Muslims of this area. Even though Kanyakumari district always stood first in literacy among the other districts of the State, the literacy of the Muslims of this district was in a pitiable condition, and female education had no place among them. The Muslim parents considered it a sin to send their daughters to schools and colleges for learning. It was very rare to see a girl with an eighth standard qualification and a boy with an S.S.L.C qualification. Their economic condition was also very poor. Thanks to the efforts taken by the elites and the philanthropists of Kanyakumari district, the modern education has

gradually spread among the Muslims and brought many changes in their lives. The common Muslim people also understood the indispensability of Modern Education and began to learn it. In due course, they very well realized that without education, the future of their children will be miserable and the illiteracy prevailing among them will jeopardize their socio-economic and political activities.

Economic Upliftment:

Once, the Muslims of these districts were working in foreign countries for a meager salary, which varied from Rs 5000 to 8000/-. Now, their educational and professional qualifications have raised their economic status. Previously, most of them went to the Gulf and Southeast Asian countries as contract labourers. But now they are going to Western countries like the USA, Canada, England, and Australia to seek their fortunes because of their professional and technical qualifications. The young educated people who are well settled in foreign countries have developed among them a farsightedness, philanthropic attitude, and social responsibility. To give an example of this, the alumni of Thiruvithancode Muslim Arts College, who are working in foreign countries, have donated a large sum to their Alma mater. The Muslim students who obtained technical qualifications have become industrial owners, and they are using modern technical development in their industries, which can give employment opportunities to hundreds of young people. The industries, especially the tanneries owned by the Muslims, once had old methods of production. But after gaining modern technical know-how, their industries got modernized, and the production increased so that their economic status has improved a lot. Some 20 or 25 years ago, only a very few Muslims were working in the government departments. Previously, the Muslims had a dislike for the Government service. The education has changed their attitude, and now the Muslims have developed a liking for Government jobs, and they are competing in equal terms with others in public service examinations and occupying key administrative posts and high ranks

in the police department too. The credit goes to the efforts of the philanthropists, the Government attitude, and, in consequence of the spread of education.

Political Awareness:

A political awakening has evolved among the Muslims, especially among the young generation. This is one of the impacts of the spread of modern education. In the political field, the Muslims also make their claims for due place. Political awareness has arisen among Muslims in recent years due to the spread of education. Electoral alliances helped the Muslims to establish their political identity in the regional politics. It led to the emergence of new leadership. Among them, P. Mohammed Ismail and S. Noor Mohammed are worthy of consideration. With the formation of the All Travancore Joint Political Congress in 1933, Muslim participation in the regional politics reached a crucial stage. Muslim participation in the TTNC provided them political identity and an ideological base for future action. Razack became a member of parliament, and A.N.Noor Mohammad was twice elected to the state legislature. Like Ismail, he is also an unpolluted politician. Tamilmahan Hussain, P.M. Kannu, M.K.Bava, G.M. Shah, M.S. Abdeen, and Malik Mohammed are the other notable politicians affiliated with rival political parties. During the Merger movement, a mammoth procession was organised on the 'Deliverance Day' scheduled on 9 August 1956. Noor Mohammad was one of the top leaders of TTNC who led the procession. Educated Muslim youth rallied under their leadership, demanding reservations for the Muslim community in Government jobs, the Legislative assembly, and Parliament.

Female Education and Empowerment:

The planned economic development envisaged an all-around socio-economic progress without showing disparity to anybody. However, gender inequality and gender bias continue to exist in society, especially in the Muslim community. But Islam protects the rights of womanhood by giving economic liberty and other privileges to them. Inequality syndrome

further manifests itself in the form of social indicators like sex ratios, low literacy, female infanticide, morbidity, and mortality amongst a girl child; all these things bring down the status and the empowerment of women. The propriety of making literacy was the soul test of education. It would be a monstrous error to consider the Muslim womanhood as uneducated because they were not allowed for a long time to get educated themselves, so it is right to call them non-educated. When a man gets an education, the illiteracy in him is eradicated whereas when a woman gets an education, the illiteracy in her and of her family is eradicated. A woman's part in her husband's avocation is at best small, and the higher her social rank and easier her worldly circumstances, the smaller it becomes.

The question of women's education was the most serious and pressing problem that had to be tackled by the Muslim community with zeal and earnestness. Islam gives equal emphasis and importance to the education of both males and females. Half of the community consists of women, and they have every right against men, even as men have rights against women. This phenomenon is not fully realized by the Muslim community, even at this late hour. One could not help suspect that in many a case, a daughter appears in school and returns merely as an advertisement of the liberalism of her parent. Even today, there are some conservative Muslims and Ulema who refuse to give higher education to their Muslim girls. More than 95 percent of the Muslim women remain without education. What hope is there for them to solve the social and economic problems of the Muslim community? This state of condition is commonly prevailing among the Muslims of Kanyakumari district, which will be changed only by the efforts and self-realization of the Muslims of this region. However, it will help one to have a clear idea when one pertinently examines the packages of rights that Islam grants to Muslim women. Although Islam grants women a comprehensive package of rights, ignorance of Islamic tenets and lack of education, and insistence of the society on using outdated non-Islamic and discriminatory cultural practices have led to the oppression of

Muslim women. This state of condition remains with Muslim women mainly due to the lack of education. The Muslim Shariah declares that the women have the right to life and education, right to worship and spiritual development, right to self-respect and kind treatment, right to choose her husband, right to have economic independence, right to make stipulation in her marriage contract, right to retain her identity, right to consortium, consultation and expression, right to have property, protection against slander and physical abuse, right to shelter as a divorcee and widow's maintenance right and remarriage.

Muslim Women Empowerment:

Empowerment, as the word denotes, is linked to knowledge and making decisions that shape one's life. One can trace the historical precedents for Muslim women's empowerment in the historical past. The Medina society, being the first Islamic community, set the tone for Muslim women's empowerment because women played important roles in the development of Islam. Muslim women in Medina played important leadership roles and worked alongside their men to promote the Islamic state. They attended the mosques to pray and listened to the sermons, took lessons from the Prophet, and sought his advice on public and personal issues. To contradict history, Muslim men of today's world argue that it is un-Islamic for women to work outside the house; some even deny women their right to education by prohibiting them from attending schools and colleges to acquire knowledge, and Islam is cited as the basis of such restrictions. They do not appreciate the fact that education is essential for all Muslims, be they men, women, disabled, or all. There is a vital difference between a Muslim woman and a Hindu woman. A Muslim should follow the 'Purdah system' as ordained by God. There will be no relaxation on it. But this should stand as a hurdle in the empowerment of Muslim women. Purdah will not stand as a barrier to acquiring education. Going to schools or colleges with purdah will not hinder their studies. Even today, we can see so many Muslim girls practicing purdah and attending schools and colleges without any hesitation. Today, one

could see Christian Nuns practicing purdah and doing their work. Purdah is taken wrongly as closing even the face of a girl, which is not correct. But some Muslim girls are practicing it without any proper knowledge of its purpose and its usage. Muslim girls are free to take up education because Islam stresses the importance equally for both men and women in acquiring education. Some twenty years back, the Muslims of Kanyakumari district rarely appreciated an educated Muslim woman, and in turn, she became only the cynosure of the society and not the asset of the community. But when compared to the previous generation, the present educated young generation has become very much aware of the fact that Islam does not deny education to them; only some people in society are enforcing it on them.

Conclusion:

The spread of education has emboldened them to raise questions against the abuses against them. Though the Muslim girls of Kanyakumari district have far advanced than their conditions some twenty or twenty-five years back, they have yet several miles to go! Even now, their educational status and empowerment are below average. There are still a lot of girls who have not attained the benefit of education. The elites of the Kanyakumari district should take efforts to bring them into the mainstream of education. The process has already started on this matter; there is a move among the elites and the philanthropists of Kanyakumari district to establish a college for women. To appreciate the upcoming awareness and sudden spurt in the search for education in the Muslim womanhood, all the pioneers who sowed the seed of interest and etiquette should be gratefully remembered for their wonderful work. More and more Muslim girls should come forward to utilize the available opportunities and pursue courses in various facilities, and contribute their skills to the development of the country.

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