

Intersections of Gender, Religion, and Education: The Case of Muslim Women Weavers in Varanasi

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Abstract

In India, a large number of people are engaged in the work of textile weaving, a craft that has been passed down through generations. The domain of the Banarasi silk industry is vast and significantly dominated by the Islamic weaver community, who continue to breathe life into this tradition. As for Banaras, it is a cultural city known for its cultural heritage and unity in religious diversity. Here, along with Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam have flourished harmoniously. Places like Sarnath, churches, ghats, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, and mosques have become popular tourist attractions. Known as Shivr nagari, this city is believed to be where King Harishchandra was sold and where people come in search of salvation. It is also the birthplace of Kabir, the nirgun poet, whose legacy seems to be fading away. Kabir belonged to the Julaha (weaver) community, and this was both his birthplace and his land of work. It was from here that the weaver community emerged. After Kabir, it seems we are forgetting the weavers who laid the foundation of the nirgun tradition and introduced the Kabirpanthi faith, which was based on Hindu-Muslim unity. Does this unity still exist today? From my observation, it appears to be vanishing. The Kabirpanthi sect, which once symbolized Hindu-Muslim unity, is disappearing.

Keywords: Muslim Women Weavers, Educational Status, Powerloom, Pattern Maintenance, Leadership or Dominance, Madrasa, Religious Diversity

INTRODUCTION

Sari weaving is one of the main economic activities of weavers in Varanasi. Since both Hindu and Muslim communities are involved in this trade, and various caste groups have adopted this profession, it is not appropriate to consider weavers as a single occupational caste. According to folklore, weaving in Varanasi

began with 'Chhittan Baba', who wove 'Izarbands' for the royal family. The Nawab of Lucknow admired his weaving and appointed him as the leader ('Sardar') of these colonies. Hence, no locality is limited to a single caste or community (Kumari: 1988). The common term used for weavers is 'Julaha', which includes several castes. Crooke (1975) referred to Julaha as a "Muslim weaving caste", representing a Hindu weaving caste converted to Islam. Thus, there were Koli Julaha, Mochi Julaha, and Ramdasi Julaha. Gradually, sharing a common occupational identity, Julahas began to mobilize as a caste group and sought recognition as Momin or Ansari (Rai, 2012). Most weavers belong to the Muslim 'Momin Ansari' community.

In contemporary Varanasi, weavers from both religious communities—Hindus and Muslims—exist (Amrita Singh & Saijala D. Naik, 2009). The Ansaris of Varanasi may be considered a vocational caste, but Rajbhar, Koli, Pasi Chamar, Julaha, Ramdasi, and Kabirpanthis also lay claim to this profession. However, the 'Momin Ansari' community dominates this trade in the city, with an estimated population of over 400,000. Currently, there are three major weaving 'Sardar' traditions in Varanasi: the first, local residents whose leadership began with Chhittan Baba; second, weavers from Mau district, also known as the Mauwala locality; and third, those who migrated from Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Deoria, and other districts and established their own leadership tradition. According to a 2017 report (Ministry of Handlooms), there are 4,331,876 weavers in India, with 95,439 of them in Varanasi district (Mishra, 2018). An estimate suggests around 500,000 weavers are directly linked to this profession in the district (Kaushik & Nagvanshi, 2011).

When we talk about women weavers in Banaras, especially those who follow Islam, they rank at the lowest level in the hierarchy of power and existence—making them most vulnerable and accessible to exploitation. Despite living in the heart of the city, the weaver community remains socially isolated, and members of their own caste have divided them. According to Marxist philosophy, Muslim members of a single caste have split into two classes: first, the Girasta—wealthy capitalists (bourgeoisie); second, the small-scale weavers—those who only weave (proletariat). The Girasta are none other than capitalist Muslims from the same caste, responsible for this stratification where class overrides caste. They are accountable for the marginalized condition of small-scale weavers, spreading misconceptions and promoting religious fundamentalism. Islam, which is based on logic and encourages Ijtihad (independent reasoning), is being transformed into a closed system with no room for negotiation—ultimately paving the way for a feudal society under the guise of Islamic fundamentalism. This orthodox mindset is a major reason for the secondary status of women. Earlier, when handlooms were prevalent, women were part of various production processes and held power. But with the advent of powerlooms, their position has deteriorated, pushing them out of production roles, thus eroding their power (Vasanthiraman, 2010).

According to sociologist Foucault, every aspect of our domestic life bears the imprint of power. Hence, our social roles and institutions are power-driven, especially when power is used to regulate social structures and hierarchies. Such regulation controls the conditions under which values like 'knowledge', 'truth', and socially accepted 'reality' are established (Foucault, 1969). In this context, women weavers are compelled to work under conditions imposed by their employers, and refusal often leads to unemployment. Consequently, the idea of educational empowerment for women from the weaver community remains centered only around their occupation. As a result, education is not given much importance among women in weaver communities. A detailed but dated report reveals that about 40% of families involved in handloom weaving in Varanasi are illiterate (Shoaib, 1994, quoted in Wood, 2014). According to the Fourth All India Handloom Census 2019–20, at the national level, approximately 23.01% of women from weaving families have never attended school. Additionally, 12.5% have less than primary education,

16.02% completed primary education, 23.06% received secondary education, 14% completed high school, and only 10.06% achieved higher secondary education (Handloom Census, 2019–20).

EDUCATIONAL STATUS

Education is a key driver of social change. Modern education plays a vital role in transforming the conditions and processes of social mobility. It not only helps an individual adapt to emerging social circumstances but also prepares them for the ongoing changes in a democratic society (Havelsrud, 1981). While many communities have shown significant improvement in educational attainment among women, some communities remain far behind the national or state average (Majumdar, 2013). Over the past few decades, India has seen a tremendous rise in educational achievement levels. The overall literacy rate in India rose from 18.33% in 1951 to 74.04% in 2011 (Census, 2011). As of now, India's overall literacy rate is 77.70% (National Statistical Survey, 2021). However, this increase in education should not be misunderstood as gender parity. The literacy rate among women in India still lags significantly behind men. According to the National Statistical Commission Survey (2021), male literacy is currently 84.70%, while female literacy stands at 70.30% (NSS, 2021). Furthermore, India ranks among the lowest globally in gender equality (Global Gender Gap Reports, 2020, 2021, 2022), ranking 112th, 140th, and 135th respectively. The National Family Health Survey reveals significant disparities in income, health, and access to education among various classes of women in India (NFHS, 2016–19, 2019–21). Using the India Human Development Survey 2011–2012, Chaudhary and Singh (2019) highlighted stark intergenerational inequalities in education among women across different regions and social categories in India.

In terms of literacy based on religion, the 2011 Census records India's overall literacy rate at 74.04%. Among women, Muslim literacy is 51.89%, compared to Hindu women at 55.97%, Sikh women at 63.29%, Buddhist women at 65.58%, Christian women at 71.97%, and Jain women at 84.93% (Census, 2011, p.102). Thus, from an educational standpoint, Muslim women's participation in education is the lowest among all religious groups. Uttar Pradesh's Muslim population is 19.26% of the total, i.e., 38.5 million (Census, 2011). The state's overall literacy rate is 67.68%, with Muslim women's literacy at 50.59%, compared to Hindu women at 58.61%, Christian women at 73.63%, Buddhist women at 57.07%, and Jain women at 92.16%. The literacy condition is particularly concerning in rural areas: the average literacy among rural Muslim women is 47.04%, while in urban areas it is 56.44% (Farooq Siddiqui, 2010). Compared to other religious groups in Uttar Pradesh, the Muslim community remains behind the mainstream.

Since independence, there has been little improvement in the socio-economic and educational status of Muslims in India. The Government of India has appointed several committees to identify the reasons for the community's educational and economic backwardness. Among them is the Ranganath Misra Commission, which revealed that the Muslim community is socially, economically, educationally, politically, and culturally marginalized and significantly lags behind the mainstream Indian society (Ranganath, 2007). Another committee, the Sachar Committee, stated in its detailed report that the major reason for widespread illiteracy among Indian Muslims is poverty (Sachar, 2006). These studies indicate that Muslim women in India are educationally deprived, economically weak, and socially marginalized. Among all major religious communities in India, the literacy rate among Muslim women is the lowest. Their participation drops sharply after primary education at secondary, graduate, and postgraduate levels. The poor educational status of Muslim women in Indian society is a serious concern. It is a significant reason for the overall backwardness of Indian Muslims, despite the Indian Constitution granting everyone equal rights and opportunities in education. Nevertheless, Muslim society—especially Muslim women—continues to lag behind the mainstream (Ziauddin & Hayat, 2022:2023). Most Muslim women in India still remain marginalized, and it is true that their empowerment can be a crucial step toward the

development of their community. The current condition of Muslim women reflects the dominance of traditional and conservative outlooks within their community (Gail, 1998).

PARTICIPATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

The Indian education system does not ensure equal access and participation for all sections of society. As it is said, "Education acts as a mirror in society; just as a mirror reflects reality before it, education reflects our internal development." Therefore, education is essential to improve both society and the nation, as it is the most crucial tool for bringing about social, cultural, and economic change. Since independence, there has been tremendous growth and development in the field of education in India. The country has succeeded in reducing poverty and improving human development indicators like education, literacy, and health. However, the benefits of this developmental process have not been equally shared by the entire population. Several efforts have been made at both the federal and provincial levels in the field of education, such as the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (2001) and the Right to Education Act (2009), which was implemented as a fundamental right for every child aged 6–14. However, due to a lack of implementation to safeguard the rights of every child, many disadvantaged groups have been left behind (Abedi, 2011).

The Sachar Committee report clearly indicates that the education level among Muslims is very low and that they lag behind the national average. The committee found that the level of Muslim children in high school and intermediate education in both rural and urban areas is much lower compared to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Sachar Committee 2006, p. 129). Recent trends in enrollment and other educational indicators suggest that Muslim parents increasingly desire modern or mainstream education, which is affordable. As a result, they are sending their children to government schools due to the prioritization of English education in private schools. Some Muslim parents may or may not prefer to send their children to madrasas. While some Muslims prioritize Urdu over English as the medium of instruction, others prefer English. Most Muslim parents believe that girls' education is not very important. Even at a young age, they withdraw them from school to get them married. This explains the high dropout rate among Muslim girls (Sachar Committee 2006, p. 130). According to UDISE (2019–20), at the higher secondary level, the participation of girls is higher than that of boys. However, when looking at participation from primary to higher secondary levels, girls' participation is found to be lower than that of boys.

PARTICIPATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The failure of educational policy is evident in the low participation of Muslim women in higher education. It is a fact that until the 1980s, higher education in India was largely considered a public good. It is argued that due to a shortage of teachers, teacher absenteeism, and short-term contractual appointments, the Indian higher education system is inadequate in providing quality education. Drèze and Sen (2013) estimate that actual teaching time in government schools has been reduced to a quarter. Teachers often prefer not to teach in government institutions due to additional non-teaching burdens and lower pay compared to private institutions. The same condition applies to higher education in terms of generating quality. Umashankar (2007) argued that two-thirds of Indian colleges and universities do not meet quality standards, and higher education institutions are increasingly leaning toward privatization to meet the demand for quality education. Agrawal (2009) argued that in the past, a lack of political will to implement strong educational policies has affected the expansion of higher education in India, where privatization is anti-poor, and high tuition fees threaten the quality of education, limiting access for students from different social backgrounds. The Sachar Committee report shows that Muslims in India are economically disadvantaged and lack basic facilities. Thus, the growing privatization of education poses obstacles for many students from marginalized socio-economic groups in India.

Another significant educational failure is the demand for English-medium schools, which generally cater to the privileged and are beyond the reach of the underprivileged. English-medium schools usually charge higher fees than local-medium schools, symbolizing a higher economic status. Many disadvantaged groups in society cannot afford English-medium schooling, creating barriers for students aspiring to attend prestigious public universities in India. Many colleges and universities admit only students with English-medium backgrounds. Muslims, as a socio-religious community, lack the basic educational qualifications needed to enter higher educational institutions, whether public or private. Despite the availability of higher education institutions for public welfare, Muslim women remain excluded from higher education at every level, from graduation to vocational or specialized training. The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) highlighted the participation of Muslims in higher educational institutions and found that, based on responses collected during the survey, 5.5% of students were from the Muslim minority and 2.3% from other minority communities. Among both Muslim and other minority communities, the number of female students was higher than male students. Despite being the second-largest minority community in India, only 5.5% of Muslims are enrolled in higher educational institutions in both public and private universities. However, in terms of gender, the participation of Muslim women is slightly higher than that of men (AISHE, 2020).

The Sachar Committee report found that among the 20–24 age group, only 5% of Muslims had completed college compared to approximately 12% among others. The relative number of Muslim graduates is lower than that of any other group. According to the same estimates, the share of OBC Hindus participating in higher education is higher than their 27% quota. The condition is worse in rural areas, where only 6.7% of Muslims pursue higher education. Only 4% of Muslims are graduates or diploma holders. The report also estimated that only one in every twenty-five students enrolled in a graduate program and only one in every fifty in a postgraduate program belongs to the Muslim community. It has been observed that many Muslim parents prefer to send their children to madrasas for education. Data from the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) shows that only 4% of all Muslim school-going students are enrolled in madrasas. In comparison with other communities, there is a stronger perception among Muslims of being unfairly treated, especially in the fields of education and employment. Many members of the Muslim community face discrimination in the job market (Sachar Committee 2006, p. 130). Among all socio-religious categories, Muslim participation in higher education institutions has significantly increased from 2015–2016 to 2019–2020. Regarding the participation of women, a notable rise has been recorded, indicating that Muslim girls are gaining better access to higher education institutions. Enrollment of Muslim women in India has increased substantially. Between 2007–2008 and 2017–2018, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of Muslim girls in higher education jumped from just 6.7% to 13.5%. This was found through an analysis of unit-level data from the 66th and 75th rounds of the NSSO. The ratio of the 18–23 age group enrolled in college was derived from the total number of Muslim women in this age group. In contrast, for Hindu women, this ratio increased from 13.4% to 24.3% during the same 10-year period.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON WOMEN WEAVERS

In brief, the Sachar Committee Report identified poverty/financial constraints, access to schools and quality of education, and religious discrimination in curricula and teaching as the main reasons behind the high dropout rates among Muslims. Additionally, the factors influencing school dropout can broadly be divided into family-related reasons, school-based reasons, and personal factors such as lack of interest in education. Parvez and Zeba (2022) studied the social and economic conditions of handloom weavers in Uttar Pradesh and found that most weavers in the state belong to the Muslim religion or the Other Backward Class (OBC) social category. Particularly in rural areas, most workers live in mud houses. In

urban areas, more families live in semi-pucca or pucca houses compared to rural areas. The education level among them is very low, and most weaver women have never attended school. About 59.05% of weaver families have an income of less than ₹5000 per month. Around 53.02% of these families have taken loans for handloom purposes. Among them, 73.05% of families work with looms, while 26.05% work without looms. Only 37.05% of female weavers possess Aadhaar cards. According to the Fourth Handloom Census (2020) conducted by the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, the vast number of women (around 2.3 million) associated with the industry indicates the significance of the weaving sector. Muslim women have been engaged in weaving across generations.

Kumari (1988), S. K. Rai (2004), and Amrita et al. (2009), in their respective studies, note that Banaras's handloom weavers, who have inherited this occupation, are in a pitiable condition due to poor socio-economic circumstances. Most of them are wage-earning weavers who, despite working more than ten hours a day, earn only minimal wages. Interestingly, the literacy rate among the weaver community is fairly encouraging, but due to poor financial conditions, they remain deprived of education. Vasanthi Raman (2013), in her book, described how weavers emerged and the significant contributions made by women weavers in Banaras to this industry. However, due to their dire economic conditions, they are unable to provide modern education to their children. Studies by Mohammad Shoaib (2005), Abdul Wahid (2006), and Sana Faisal (2016) indicate how their sons, wives, and daughters-in-law are all involved in the art of weaving. They cannot afford basic medical care or educational expenses for their children due to inadequate payment. Consequently, their children are leaving the weaving profession, migrating abroad for better income, or seeking jobs for survival. Globalization has affected the entire economy and traditional cottage industries. The once-thriving handloom industry has declined due to decreased demand. Studies by Praveen Shukla (2008), Tarun Kanti Bose (2008), Santosh Kumar Rai (2022), and Siddiqui & Namrata (2022) show that only 30% of daughters achieve a different educational level compared to their mothers. Moreover, the educational gap between mothers and daughters exceeds just 14%. The changing dynamics in educational attainment between mothers and daughters can be attributed to various government policies and incentives that have enabled daughters to at least pursue primary education. However, changes in educational attainment beyond secondary education remain difficult. Only a small percentage of daughters have participated in any kind of higher educational institution, highlighting several micro-level community-specific issues such as social norms/values, poor economic conditions, health concerns, and occupational burdens existing within the weaver community that significantly contribute to stagnation in educational progress. A recent study by Rajiv and Ziauddin (2023) revealed that 38% of weavers are illiterate, 54% of respondents have completed only primary education, and only two had completed education up to grade ten. Their education came from madrasas, and only two continued their education in government schools beyond the madrasa. Since the madrasa is a primary institution of religious (Islamic) education, they have little exposure to worldly education.

This article addresses the following objectives:

- (i) To study the current educational status of Muslim women weavers.
- (ii) To identify problems related to education among Muslim women weavers and determine possible reasons for low enrollment and high dropout rates.
- (iii) To analyze the trends in educational advancement among Muslim women weavers.

Research Methodology: The present research study is exploratory and co-descriptive in nature. The study is based on the weavers of the Varanasi district in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The study area was divided into four sub-areas—Madanpura, Bajardeeha, Kazzakpura, and Lallapura—based on quota sampling. A total of 60 female respondents were selected using purposive sampling. Data was collected from primary

sources through interview schedules and observation. Secondary sources included published literature and other related studies. The collected data was analyzed using tabulation and classification methods with appropriate techniques.

Table 1 Analysis and Educational Findings

Category	Illiterate	Primary	Secondary	Senior Secondary	Graduate	Postgraduate	Total %
Respondents	38.36	21.66	16.66	15.00	6.66	1.66	100 %
Husbands	28.35	23.33	18.33	16.66	10.00	3.33	100 %
Fathers	68.36	15.00	10.00	5.00	1.64	0.00	100 %
Mothers	81.67	10.00	5.00	3.33	0.00	0.00	100 %
Daughters	15.00	28.36	25.00	16.64	10.00	5.00	100 %
Sons	10.00	33.33	30.00	15.00	8.34	3.33	100 %

Source: Field Work

Table 1 presents the educational status of female respondents aged 29–38, revealing that 38.36% of them are illiterate, while 61.64% are literate. Of the literate women, 21.66% have completed primary education, 16.66% have completed middle school, 15% have completed secondary level education, 6.66% have graduated, and only 1.66% have attained postgraduate education. The analysis clearly shows that the illiteracy rate among respondents is the highest at 38.36%. The educational status of respondents' husbands (aged 39–48) shows that 28.36% are illiterate, while 71.64% are literate. Among the literate, 23.33% completed primary education, 18.33% completed middle school, 16.66% secondary education, 10% graduation, and 3.33% post-graduation. This indicates that the husbands' educational level is relatively better than that of the female respondents.

Analyzing the educational status of the respondents' parents (aged 49 and above), it was found that 68.36% of the fathers are illiterate, while the illiteracy rate among mothers is even higher at 81.67%. About 15% of the fathers and 10% of the mothers completed primary education; 10% of the fathers and 5% of the mothers completed middle school; 5% of the fathers and 3.33% of the mothers completed secondary education. Only 1.64% of the fathers were graduates, while none of the mothers attained this level. Neither parent reached postgraduate education. The analysis reveals that the educational mobility seen in the parents' generation is mirrored in the respondents' and their husbands' generation, though the nature of this change varies. For the respondents' children (aged 18–28), the illiteracy rate among sons is 10% and among daughters is 15%. Sons' educational levels show 33.33% at the primary level, 30% at middle school, 15% at secondary school, 8.34% graduates, and 3.33% postgraduates. In comparison,

daughters show 28.36% at primary, 25% at middle school, 16.64% at secondary level, 10% at graduation, and 5% at postgraduate level.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis reveals that the younger generation of Muslim women weavers shows slightly better educational levels than the previous generation. The illiteracy rate among mothers of the respondents was 81.67%, which has dropped to 38.36% among the respondents themselves. Both respondents and their husbands show similar levels of educational mobility compared to their parents. However, a notable trend is seen in the educational dynamics of their sons and daughters: while boys initially outperform girls at the primary and middle levels, the dropout rate among boys becomes significantly higher at the secondary level. This is largely due to a major transformation in the sari industry in Varanasi, particularly after the 1990s, caused by the introduction of powerlooms. These machines, costing between 200,000 to 250,000 rupees, require only one male operator and can produce 3–4 saris in 12–15 hours. This shift has had a direct impact on weaver women. Many either pursue education or are married off, leading to sustained dropout rates (Bose, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Even after seven decades of independence, India's development has remained unbalanced. The rich have become richer, and the poor poorer. This is particularly true for the Muslim minority, whose condition remains dire. The root causes are poverty, illiteracy, and high population. Within this group lies a class that has sustained its livelihood through weaving for generations. Among them exist two classes: the Girasta (wealthy) and the small-scale weavers (poor). In Marxist terms, these may be referred to as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The Girasta exploits the labor of small weavers and pays them only a nominal wage. As a result, these weavers suffer from problems in every sphere: education, health, employment, and medical care. Worries about educating children and arranging their marriages persist throughout their lives. Many families are heavily burdened by debt. Survey data show that the weaver community, due to constant physical labor, is afflicted by numerous severe health issues and lacks the funds even for basic treatment. But this is not only a health crisis it is a societal one. Sociologist Bourdieu said that "culture is an acquired system of habitual behavior that generates individual schemes of action." The weaver community's culture is one in which generational transmission of individual labor continues. Bourdieu also posits that "social structures give rise to culture, which then produces behaviors that ultimately recreate those same social structures." This statement applies completely to the weaver society. The study reveals class conflict within this community, aligning with another sociologist Gramsci's theory. Even within the weavers, there are exploiters and the exploited. The exploiters see themselves as rulers. Gramsci asserts that the main strength of the modern bourgeois society is its ruling class's cultural leadership, through which it imposes its value systems on the rest of the population via family, religious institutions, and schools. A significant issue in this society is gender-based disparity. The head of the weaver family is usually male, who takes the money earned by the women while making them work. He shows no concern for a sick woman in the household, and women cannot use their earnings for themselves. This paradox is stark—they are subordinate to men, and their desires hold little significance. These women continue to live in double subjugation, devoting their lives to family care. This is perhaps the most deprived group within the community. The social condition of Ansari weavers in Varanasi reflects that feudal features remain embedded in market structures, even though operational and ecological changes have occurred over time.

According to Nandy (2015), improved educational systems and growing industrialization have rendered age-old professions obsolete. The perceived stability and viability of caste-based occupations have become uncertain. New generations, aligned with modern social values, challenge inherited occupational structures. For those without access to quality education and lacking resources to change their status, continuing their father's profession becomes less a choice and more a compulsion. By opting for

education-based careers, they climb the social ladder, leading to occupational mobility within India's caste hierarchy.

From a theoretical standpoint, government schemes appear to address multiple dimensions of the handloom industry. However, in practice, these schemes have largely failed to meet their objectives. The field study reveals several reasons for their failure. First, to benefit from government schemes, civic awareness is necessary, with education playing a critical role. A lack of education is clearly evident in the weaver community. Their education is mostly limited to basic religious instruction, with minimal exposure to modern secular education. Many believe that education cannot sustain their livelihood. They continue to follow traditional skills passed down for generations, showing little inclination toward new techniques. They are also completely unaware of modern communication tools such as the internet and online marketplaces. As a result, they have been unable to adapt to changing market dynamics.

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