

**CONCEPTUALIZING MUSLIM WOMEN EDUCATION IN
KERALA: CULTURAL CAPITAL AND HABITUS FOR
SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

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ABSTRACT

The realm of education in Kerala, to be specific, education of Muslims in Kerala, has got a transnational contribution because of its longstanding, deep direct connection with the gulf region. The exceptional economic growth and other developmental determinants have been well attributed to this unbroken relationship with the Arab countries and its influence on Kerala's population irrespective of religion and class. However, the reading and research related to Muslim women education has always been presented with prejudices and stereotypes. Religious education, early marriage, patriarchal patterns, etc. have been over emphasized and the impact of Muslim women's education had been measured in terms of whether it is of definite use to them or not. This 'definite use' has been defined in a restricted, narrow line and thus the experiences of education of Muslim women have not been conceptualized well. In this paper, the researcher standing within the disciplinary boundaries of Sociology is trying to define women's education as a cultural capital located in the space of religion of Islam and how it is influencing the socio-religious reform and progress of the whole Muslim community and the population of Kerala in general. Instead of looking at how the experience of education is of definite use for Muslim women, the index paper is looking at how this experience of education is influencing these women in their habitus shaping, enhancing or constricting their space in the larger social system and thus to explain how Bourdieu's concepts of Cultural capital and Habitus can link the past to the present progress of Muslim women's education in Kerala.

Keywords: Muslim women education, Education in Kerala, Muslim community, Muslims in Kerala

INTRODUCTION

Islam in Kerala spread early, through Arab trade and Kerala's Muslims have an unbroken, longstanding and deep direct connection with the Gulf region (Osella & Osella, 2008). Muslims in Kerala, are characteristically exceptional in comparison with the Muslims of other states in

India. They are estimated to be at fourth of the state's population, who are the well-educated Muslims in the country (Census,2011). Muslims, being a dominant minority community in the state, owns a distinctive and rich culture and history which plays a significant role in defining the diverse culture and history of Kerala. However, these Muslim imprints were often neglected and looked at with prejudices while the most socio-cultural legacies of the community have not been codified yet (Mazumdar and Guruswamy, 2006). When it comes to women, high educational and literacy attainment are attributed to improved economic, social and domestic status of women. Women in the past have been less likely than men of comparable ability to follow other paths of educational and occupational attainment (Paul & John, 1985) regardless of their religious background. The educational backwardness of Muslims in the past can be well attributed to the rigid structure maintained by the community where the clergy reads and interprets the Quran and the Muslims, especially women were not encouraged to learn Malayalam or English. However, there were separate systems for women to learn Arabic (Osella & Osella, 2008). However Women of Kerala in general have always been imbibed with the importance of acquiring education and literacy (Mitra & Singh, 2007). The readings and research related to education of women in Kerala, Muslim women education in particular have been presented with prejudices and stereotypes. Though researchers are convinced about women being motivated and encouraged to get educated and to attain skills because of growing up in a matrilineal society like Kerala (Mitra & Singh, 2007), the end outcome of education is expected to be pursuing a challenging career and everything else taken care by women have been underestimated. This definition of 'definite use' of education given for taking up a challenging career is problematic.

Using Bourdie's concepts of cultural capital and habitus this paper is aiming to discuss the end outcome of Muslim women's education in the larger social scenario of Kerala. While analyzing the potential connection between education and its properties of cultural capital, we are not going to discuss the discourse of how it creates class inequalities, since it is beyond the scope of this paper.

CHANGING SCENARIO

There is a dire need to have an alternate reading for the status of Muslim women in Kerala because the Muslim public domain in Kerala is characteristically consistent with reformation and modernization. Different Muslim organization in the state give adequate attention to reform the community from time to time, education has been a prime medium for that (Santhosh, 2013). Reformism, via the central tropes of enlightenment, education, rationality and so on, has become imbricated with more generalized ideas about progress. Among Kerala Muslims, it is a widespread aspiration now to have a 'modern' and 'systematic' life with good secular education for one's children (Osella & Osella, 2008). The result has been shown in recent researches where the findings were showing significant improvement in terms of Muslim women's personal

autonomy, political empowerment and influence in decision making (Cherayi & Jose, 2016). Kerala's Muslims associate religious reformism with: a self-consciously 'modern' outlook; the promotion of education; rallying of support from the middle classes.(Osella & Osella, 2008)

MUSLIM WOMEN EDUCATION AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

The association between religion, knowledge and teaching in Islam creates a discourse which elevates teaching/learning to a sacred duty of the highest order. Hence, one cannot put blame on the religion for not knowing and also for not acquiring knowledge. The nature of knowledge (revealed and acquired) and its contribution towards individual's holistic development were stressed enough which would shape the individual and the knowledge-givers were always held highest positions in the order (Shah, 2006). Reading on the lines of holistic development, the outcome of education envisioned in Islam takes a broader sense instead of restricting its use only in terms of occupational success. For this fine reading which encompasses the whole use of Muslim women's education Bourdieu's concepts of Cultural capital and habitus can be used. Stated by Bourdieu, cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and use educated language. This cultural capital is transmitted from parents to their children and it is associated with parental qualification (Sullivan, 2002). And the value of this capital is tied to its context. Cultural capital is assumed to be one of the central family-based endowments whose social class value impacts offspring intergenerational educational probabilities (Tzanakis, 2011). Parents endow their children with physical, human, social and especially cultural capital. Cultural capital embodies the sum total of investments in aesthetic codes, practices and dispositions transmitted to children through the process of family socialisation, or in Bourdieu's term, habitus- an important form of cultural inheritance (Tzanakis, 2011). If there is a change in the educational achievements of Muslim younger women, the reasons behind this status shift is the capital possessed by the earlier generation women. There the concept habitus comes in, which like cultural capital, is transmitted within the home. The women in the past had the possession of legitimate knowledge and a set of attitudes and values. A major component of the dominant habitus is a positive attitude towards education. (Alice sullivan, 2002), which the women instilled in their children and their role in reformation cannot be neglected.

If we are to treat the return of cultural capital merely in terms of economic capital and occupational success (Sullivan, 2002), we would be forced to ignore the role of these women in fostering the family, and the community and also promoting the education of their children. If the current generation of Muslim young women in Kerala is pursuing their educational goals and achieving success within the wider social scenario, it has been shaped by the cultural capital and habitus of their mothers. And researches standing within the conventional demo graphic and measurements of end outcome of education would fail to capture consequential aspects of this

cultural variation. An alternate for this narrow framework would be the take of Bourdieu's own explanation that economic and cultural capital can function as symbolic power and symbolic capital and are regarded as legitimate competence and authority. Symbolic capital is the credit, belief or recognition of the value of a person or an object. Habitus takes better into account the competence of individuals and groups to understand the characteristics and different dimensions of social problems (Husu, 2012).

In that respect, ethnic cultural capital, religious cultural capital, occupational cultural capital as well as social network-based cultural capital may be identified. Capitals can be identified on a continuum as Schuller, Bynner and Feinstein (2004) suggest, but there can also be various cultural capitals. Indeed, there may be cultural capital within social capital. A new theory is therefore needed to accommodate this conceptual flexibility in readdressing the issue of persisting social inequalities in educational attainment.

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