

Muslim Women's Education in Colonial India

Dr. Mirza Md. Sabbir

State Aided College Teacher, Category -1, (Sact-1), Department of History
Purnidevi Chowdhury Girls' College, Bolpur, Birbhum – 731204

Abstract

The education of Muslim women in colonial India came out at the point of interaction between the imperial education policy, community reform, and the socio-cultural standards. The literature in the wider fields of disciplinary colonial history, gender studies and sociology of education is that access to education among Muslim women was defined by disproportionate interactions with Western knowledge, religious traditions, and competing imaginings of modernity. The fundamental issue discussed in the academic literature is the relentless marginalisation of Muslim women in colonial educational systems, even though the institutions and reformist practises have been extended in the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries. Basing on literature-based and analytical studies, the reviewed materials show that colonial policies inclined themselves to pay more attention to communal considerations, elite interests, and supported gendered expectations according to which women received education that was limited to domesticity, moral training, and controlled literacy. Simultaneously, Muslim reformers and women activists bargained these restrictions by carefully pushing schooling, women institutions, and curriculum changes, which were in keeping with the religious and cultural standards. The case studies conducted in the region, especially those conducted in Bengal and North India, underscore the fact that the discussions on purdah, law, as well as the identity of the community directly affected the educational attendance and performance. All in all, the literature indicates that the educational experiences of the colonial times were crucial in the social positioning and identity formation of Muslim women as well as their future empowerment patterns. The historical knowledge offers a critical interpretive perspective of inequalities faced by Muslim women in South Asian education today.

Keywords: Muslim women, colonial India, women's education, colonial education policy, gender and community, social reform, purdah

Introduction

The education of Muslim women in colonial India is an important question that takes up a key place in further historiography of colonial education, gender and the formation of communities. The process of education of Muslim women under colonial rule did not develop in a vacuum; instead, it was influenced by the interplay of the forces of British education policy, local social reform movements, religious discussions, and the political situation of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. It has been shown by academics that colonial

Published: 16 February 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i2.45545>

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

education interventions not only opened new avenues to education, but also social strata, especially when it comes to Muslim women, whose access to formal education continued to be restricted and unequal per region and social stratum. Consequently, the education of Muslim women turned into a disputed field where such issues as morality, tradition, modernity, and communal identity were being bargained out all the time.

The already available literature also implies that the discussion of Muslim women education cannot be interpreted only in the frames of the colonial policy or the reformist purpose. Rather, education served as a rhetorical and practical arena in which the leaders of the Muslim community, reformers, and even women themselves produced messages regarding the survival of their culture, their religious identity, and their political voices during the colonial rule. Gendered conceptions of respectability, purdah and domesticity were also prominent in the determination of the content and the acceptable modality of the education of Muslim women which usually favoured home-based or strictly monitored instruction above the school-based education. These relations reveal the entrenched nature of educational programmes among Muslim women in the context of more general debates about law, social reform, and the re-establishment of boundaries of communities in the colonial period.

Regional, especially provincial, levels, especially Bengal, colonial education reform and communicative politics also made the educational experiences of Muslim women more complex. Research on colonial Bengal has found that the change in British policy, as well as the intra-community tensions and competition between Hindus and Muslims, affected the formation of educational institutions serving Muslims and their acceptance. Education got mixed up with the issues of representation, jobs, and political influence, which marginalised Muslim women in the colonial and native reform movements. It is on this background that the history of Muslim women education in colonial India is needed to comprehend the relationship of gender, religion and colonial rule in creating unequal paths of education. This is where the current research places itself in this field of scholarship to critically address these relations and also to add to an in depth insight on the experience of Muslim women in education in the colonial period.

Methodology

The current study uses a qualitative and historical research approach, which relies on the narrative literature review, to review Muslim women education in colonial India. The study is based solely on the secondary sources that could be scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles in journals, doctoral dissertations, working papers, and historical documents on the topic of colonial education, gender, and Muslim social reform. The method adopted is a historical-analytical, which contextualises the developments in education in the wider socio-religious and political context of the colonial rule. The chosen literature is critically examined to outline the major themes addressed in it including policies of colonial education, socio-religious restrictions, reformist interventions, and gendered visions of learning among Muslim populations. Instead of being a descriptive account, the study pursues thematic and interpretive synthesis of available literature to learn the inclusiveness and non-inclusiveness trends in women education. This method can be used to develop a subtle and context-driven insight into

how the colonial rule, the community identity, and the gender norms interacted to influence educational experiences of the Muslim women.

Literature Review

The literature review is also a necessary part of any scholarly research as it places the current study in the context of the already existing knowledge base. It allows the researcher to know how a certain research problem has been researched with time passing and what perspectives and methods have been taken and the conclusion made. Through the systematic analysis of previous research, literature review enables in determining the gaps in the research, unnecessary duplication and defining the scope, relevance, and contribution of the current study in the overall academic discourse.

Shikha Saini (2023) in her study *Women and Education in India: A Historical Analysis* examines the evolution of women's education in India from the ancient period to the modern era. The main goal of the research is to follow historically the process of development of the education of women concerning the socio-religious and political developments. The research is descriptive, and historical in nature and uses secondary sources as the basis. Saini concludes that despite women having relatively greater access to educations in earlier times, invasions by foreigners and mediaeval socio-cultural changes caused the degradation of women education. She also points out that the colonial policies and post independence government programmes tried to revive the education of women, but the structural issue remained in place.

Gail Minault (1998) in *Secluded Scholars: Women education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, specifically concerns herself with the phenomenon of education of Muslim women in the context with the social reform movements in the colony time. The paper will seek to understand how education became a negotiation ground among reforms, religion and gender norms. According to Minault, the education of Muslim women was mostly promoted in controlled and segregated forms, based on the historical study of the reformist writing, institutions and the involvement of women. The paper concludes that although reformers approved women education, it was largely in areas of home and moral training other than intellectual development or career growth.

Karin A. Deutsch (1998) in her doctoral dissertation *Muslim Women in Colonial North India, c. 1920-1947: Politics, Law and Community Identity* investigates the relationship between gender and Muslim community identity in late colonial India. The study aims to examine the symbolic use of issues pertaining to Muslim women such as education in the political and legal discourses. Using archival research and historical analysis, Deutsch discovers that the issue of education amongst Muslim women was strongly bound to the discussions of purdah, personal law and community protection. The paper concludes that the education of women was influenced not only by the emancipative interests and principles but also by the political issues and the establishment of the communal identity.

Nilanjana Paul (2016), in her doctoral dissertation *Muslim Education and Communal Conflict in Colonial Bengal: British Policies and Muslim Responses from 1854 to 1947*, examines the impact of colonial education policies on Muslim education in Bengal. The paper seeks to know how British education reforms and responses of Muslims led to the communal tensions.

Through archival sources and policy analysis, Paul illustrates that the colonial policies of education gave advantage to English education and access to the elite which left large numbers of the Muslim population disadvantaged which included those women. This paper concludes that the education reforms increased competition between the Hindu and Muslim communities and marginalised Muslim women to both the colonial education institutions and communal education programmes.

In Muslim Education for Women in India: A Comprehensive Review, Shahrukh Islam (2023) gives a general background of how Muslim women education in India was, or is, in the present day. The aim of the research is to analyse the education issues, which Muslim women encountered in the past pre-colonial era, as well as the modern days. It is a review based analytic study that uses secondary literature and policy reports. Islam determines that socio-economic, religious interpretations, and institutional constraints have always limited access to education by Muslim women even with the different reforms and governmental undertakings.

In the article Education of Muslim Women in India: A Brief Discussion past to present, Nures Salam (2018) follows the development of Muslim women education throughout its history through the different stages. The paper will set out to discuss the educational trends in the Mughal era, the British and post-independent India. Salam concludes his research by using descriptive and secondary data analysis that Muslim women were still under educated in the colonial period and they progressed slowly after the independence. The research paper finds that inadequate infrastructure and absence of good institutions, as well as social-cultural factors, still influence the education levels of Muslim women.

S. Choudhuri (2016), in her study The Colonial Idea of Girlhood and the Muslim Identity: Grounding Poverty and Gender in Urban Bengal, explores how colonial discourses shaped Muslim girls' education and identity. The study aims at examining colonial representations of ideal girlhood and how they affect modern Muslim societies. Through ethnographic interpretations and analysis of history, Choudhuri concludes that the Muslim girls had gendered and moral roles supported by the colonial educational expectations. The paper finds that these colonial structures are apparent in education aspirations and identity development of Muslim girls.

In Understanding Marginalisation of Muslim Women: A Study in Bengaluru City, Zeenat Husain (2024) presents a study of the socio-economic marginalisation of Muslim women in modern India by referencing to the historical background of colonialism. The study aims at evaluating the reasons that have led to the further marginalisation of Muslim women. Through the primary and secondary sources of data, Husain draws the conclusion that the educational disadvantages of the colonials, the policy gaps that prevailed after independence, and the constraints in educational and economic progression at the community level led to the continuing educational and economic backwardness of the Muslim women.

On the whole, the analyses sources prove that the educational process of Muslim women in colonial India was influenced by historical, political, socio-religious, and institutional aspects. Although a lot of literature on the policies of colonial education and the social movements of reforms is available, the literature suggests that specific studies are needed to incorporate

gender, community identity, and colonial control and governance to understand the experience of Muslim women in terms of education. The current research attempt aims to fill this research gap in the context of an analytical framework.

Pre-Colonial Education

The religious, cultural and socio-economic frameworks of Muslim women in India before the onset of colonialism were of a vast difference to that of the institutional structures that were established during the British rule. Most of the pre-colonial Muslim education was imprinted on the traditional Islamic system of learning which focused on religious teachings, moral education and the propagation of cultural values and not on mass or state-funded education. Family, communal and religious networks were the main mediators of learning to women, and the main institutional spaces of knowledge were maktabs and madrasas. Nevertheless, the access of women to these spaces continued to be socially differentiated, which in most cases depended on the class, descent, and the situation in the region, which led to the unequal educational opportunities among the Muslim community.

According to the academic literature, the education of women was neither pre-empted nor discouraged in the elite and aristocratic Muslim families especially during the Mughal rule. Rather, it was home based education, in which women were tutored to read religious texts, learn some basic literacy in Persian or Arabic, and develop manners, poetry and moral finesse according to what was considered fit in their societal capacities. This theory of learning legitimised gendered notions of respectability and domesticity, and instead of being institutionalised, learning was placed within the domestic context. This means that although education among Muslim women was present during the pre-colonial period, it was not theorised as a means of social mobility or civic engagement but it was the way of meeting their family and religious duties (Salam, 2018).

Meanwhile, the pre-colonial period cannot be described as uniform and stale. The history indicates that the practises of education were also dynamic and adjusted to the local conditions, and some women became learned people in the religious or literary communities. However, lack of a centralised educational policy and dependence on patronage-based systems did not support the growth of education to non-privileged groups. These features allowed Muslim women to enter a new system of colonial educational reforms with a set of traditions of segregated and informal, and class-based learning. The pre-colonial educational trends are thus crucial in putting the subsequent upsets and continuities that colonialism imposed into context and understanding the historical underpinnings that the discourses concerning the education of Muslim women would be built upon subsequently.

Colonial Education Policies.

The colonial education policies in India also signified a breakthrough with the already existing systems of learning and the consequences were expansive to the education of Muslim women. The British interventions in the education did not have the social inclusion as a major force rather it had administration, political, economic interests. The entrance of English education and grant-in-aid schemes and state-controlled institutions reshaped the access to knowledge and redefined the aim of education itself. In this context, the Muslim communities, especially

women, were not placed in equal terms by the colonial policies because colonial policies favoured the modes of learning which led to western epistemologies and marginalised native and religious modes of learning which had been so far very instrumental in the lives of Muslim education (Hardy, 1983).

In their academic deliberations, it is pointed out that colonial reforms did not work in a social vacuum but rather they interacted with the existing communal and gender hierarchies. Education became one of the crucial places where the colonial rule categorised, contrasted and ranked communities and tended to perpetuate the ideas about the backwardness of Muslim education. These policies put Muslim women in a paradoxical state they were able to see women education being more and more discussed as a sign of progress and civilisation but access to this education was still unattainable by social norms, financial restrictions, and the interests of the state that preferred to educate men and participate in elite activities. Consequently, colonial education policies served in increasing gender differences in Muslim community instead of addressing this issue in a systematic manner.

Moreover, colonial education policies increased the argument on tradition, reform, and cultural identity. Frequently the focus on the education of women was mediated by domesticity and moral control and fell under the general colonialist concerns of social stability and respectability. The policies fostered selective changes that aimed at redefining the role of women in the private domain and not encouraging them to be fully involved in the public or intellectual life. In this respect, colonial education policies were effective not only as tools of education but also as tools of social control, instilling gendered and communal assumptions into the education environment. This influenced the way the Muslims reacted to colonial education and eventually prepared further reformist and nationalist ventures towards women education (Sarkar, 1992).

Socio-Religious Constraints

The socio-religious conventions served as a determining factor as to the educational opportunities that Muslim women could receive in colonial India and they tended to work as significant sources of constraint in the sense that they inhibited access to as well as the reception of formal education. Literature sources underline that education of Muslim women was often mediated by the standards of modesty, respectability, and moral regulation, which had a strong hold in the life of the community. Some of these practises like purdah and gender segregation were not just social conventions but they became symbols of cultural identity at a time when Muslims were starting to feel more and more scrutinised and marginalised in a colonial society. Consequently, female education was frequently perceived with scepticism, especially in connexion with the influence of missions, as well as Westernised schools, so families chose to give women limited, home-based types of education rather than institutional schooling.

Religious readings and communal discourses also strengthened these restrictions by promoting the female domestic roles at the expense of the female involving themselves in the society. Education was only accepted and even welcomed in a limited sense that it was believed to improve the skill of women as custodians of morality in the home and as carriers of religious beliefs to the coming generations. This cherry-picking led to a very limited understanding of

women education that instilled a basic literacy and religious education and discouraged high or professional education. These trends were worsened by the colonial period, with socio-religious fears being endangered by the concerns of cultural loss and loss of community independence under British domination (Choudhuri, 2016).

Simultaneously, the recent scholarship emphasises that the socio-religious constraints are not to be conceptualised as stable or similarly repressive. Instead, they were influenced by continuous negotiations among communities of Muslims, based on their classes, regions, and being exposed to reformist movements. Although conservative interpretations tended to limit the educational engagement, other voices emerged such as the voices of women themselves in order to challenge strict conventions and find a compromise between religious group values and the development of education. However, the structural imbalances and deeply rooted social sentiments ensured that these efforts remained narrow with regards to their coverage. The existence of socio-religious restrictions in this way was a major factor in the further marginalisation of Muslim women into the colonial educational environment, which further propagated the exclusion patterns that continued beyond the colonial times (Husain, 2024).

The Reformers and Women Intellectuals.

This issue of the education of Muslim women in colonial India was not discussed only within the state policy or the abstract reformist discourse: it was also actively constructed by various reformers and women intellectuals who treated education as a moral, social, and intellectual endeavour. The reviewed literature has shown that these players were active in an arena of tension that had been constructed by the colonial power, religious authority and community anxieties, but had established their own areas of thinking and practise in education. Their works indicate that Muslim women education was not viewed as a total westernisation or as a total traditionalism, but as a compromised process of selective reform.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is one of the most powerful voices of women intellectuals. Her books and her efforts as an educator combated the mental isolation of Muslim women and advocated vehemently in favour of rational education as a way of esteem and social righteousness. She criticised both the religious interpretation which was patriarchal and the colonial stereotypes claiming that ignorance and not religion was the major cause of subordination of women (Hossain, 1911). The fact that she had started schools of Muslim girls was an example of an effective integration of feminist awareness and cultural responsiveness.

Another major personality was Muhammadi Begum, editor of the Urdu women journal Tahzib-e-Niswan. She made female literacy a normal part of respectable domestic life through essays, advice literature and editorials. Although much of her talk supported ideals of womanhood based on family and morality, she nevertheless broadened intellectual interest of Muslim women and sanctioned reading and writing as acceptable feminine activities (Begum, 1898).

The man-reformers too had a significant role as far as the outlines of female education were concerned. Shaikh Abdullah under the banner of early educational programmes in Muslim girls, supported the female education programme as a key to regenerating the community, but under strongly controlled morality parameters. His work was representative of a larger

reformist movement of endorsing education without gender mixing or religious indecency (Abdullah, 1904).

The intellectual atmosphere in which these characters had to work was also influenced by the previous reformist thinking related to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan whose conservative opinions on women education focused on domestic education and moral training. Although not explicitly progressive on gender equality, his concepts shaped the later arguments on the subject by introducing education as something that was not incompatible with Islam, but that had limited possibilities (Khan, 1871).

Lastly, the concerted efforts of the Muslim women organisations and conferences throughout the first half of the twentieth century offered avenues on which educated women expressed mutual interests on their issues of literacy, education and social reform. These forums indicate that Muslim women were becoming more and more thinking subjects in the field of education than they were as passive receivers of reformation.

To the extent, these reformers and women thinkers testify to the idea that the education of Muslim women in colonial India was formed at the level of multiple and even conflicting interventions. Their works emphasise the existence of native feminist and reformist ideas that negotiated instead of just responding to the colonial educational order.

Colonial Legacy

The history of Muslim women education in India is neither limited to the historical era of British rule nor to the postcolonial disparities in education, the practise in institutions, and the social perceptions. According to the academic books, the colonial forms of educational policy have exerted structural impacts over time by privileging some forms of knowledge, language and access to institutions at the expense of community-based and gender inclusive learning practises. In the case of Muslim women, this legacy was through continued decreased educational enrolment where colonial institutions did not break the already existing social structures but reformulated them into new bureaucratic and policy-based structures (Madusudan, 2011). Education therefore became a source of representation and a place of marginalisation, making gendered differences the roots of contemporary Indian education.

This persistence of colonialism in regard to women education can also be seen in how the postcolonial governance inherited and transformed colonial priorities. Research points to the fact that even in response to formal assurances of equality and universal schooling, the colonial focus on the selective promotion and elite access still shaped policy practise. The already disadvantaged women in the colonial neglected society and their socio-religious restrictions had left them at the edge of education development. This persistence is an indication that colonial legacies were not just past residues but dynamic powers that influenced institutional inertia and inequitable education performance (Padmawati, 2008).

Moreover, the colonial influence impacted the realisation of the culture of attachment to education among the Muslim women, by solidifying very limited arguments about what constituted proper education. The transformative power of education as an instrument of empowerment was curtailed by colonial discourse which tended to interpret women education

in domestic efficiency and moral reform. Postcolonial reforms, although the expansion of access was in principle, having difficulties overcoming these inherited assumptions, made slow and uneven changes to the situation of Muslim women in different regions and social layers. The continuation of these patterns shows how strong the impact of colonial education systems on current realities remains and the necessity to question previous method in the perspective of current inequalities in the education of Muslim women (Kapoor, 1999).

Conclusion

Based on the theme of Muslim Women Education in Colonial India, this paper has explored the historical dynamics whereby education to Muslim women was formulated, constrained and selectively changed by the colonial rule. Using the offered scholarly literature alone, the analysis has proven that the experience of Muslim women in education cannot be interpreted in a linear development or deterioration. Instead, they were the products of a complex interaction of pre-colonial practises, the policies of colonial education, socio-religious customs, and reformist interventions which, combined, organised both possibilities and constraints. The discussion has also revealed that colonial education policies did not merely bring education to Islamic women but modified and redefined the meaning, scope and social purpose of education. Although colonialism spread the structures of institutions and new kinds of knowledge, it also pushed native systems of education to the periphery and strengthened the hierarchy of genders and caste. There were also the socio-religious limitations that were exacerbated by colonial fears of identity and cultural extinction and hindered the access of women to both public and higher education which tended to reduce learning to the home arena. Meanwhile, reformers and female intellectuals in Muslim societies actively bargained these limits and developed educational desires that reconciled religious values with discriminatory participation in modernity.

However, the research does not lack limitations. It is limited by its dependence on secondary sources and more regionally based literature, especially based on North India and Bengal and which might not capture as much of the diversity of experiences of Muslim women throughout colonial India. In addition, the voices of the women who were not elite or who lived in rural areas are still underrepresented in existing sources, which has more to do with what is missing in the historiography as a whole. The insights can be fruitfully expanded by future studies through conducting comparative regional research, including vernacular sources and studying micro-histories of women educational practises outside institutions. These methods would further the insight into the local negotiation of colonial legacies, and the development of educational paths of Muslim women in various social and cultural contexts, which would broaden the analytical approach developed in the present paper.

References

1. Saini, S. (2023). Women and education in India: A historical analysis. *International Journal of Applied Research*, 9(2), 83–88.
2. Hardy, P. (1983). *The Muslims of British India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3. Choudhuri, S. (2016). The colonial idea of girlhood and the Muslim identity: Grounding poverty and gender in urban Bengal. *NSOU Journal of Social Sciences*. Kolkata: Netaji Subhas Open University.
4. Minault, G. (1998). *Secluded scholars: Women's education and Muslim social reform in colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
5. Deutsch, K. A. (1998). *Muslim women in colonial North India, c. 1920–1947: Politics, law and community identity* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Cambridge, Cambridge.
6. Paul, N. (2016). *Muslim education and communal conflict in colonial Bengal: British policies and Muslim responses from 1854 to 1947* (Doctoral dissertation). West Virginia University, Morgantown.
7. Islam, S. (2023). Muslim education for women in India: A comprehensive review. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*.
8. Salam, N. (2018). Education of Muslim women in India: A brief discussion from past to present. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 6(1), 1096–1102.
9. Husain, Z. (2024). *Understanding marginalisation of Muslim women: A study in Bengaluru city* (Working Paper No. 577). Bengaluru: Institute for Social and Economic Change.
10. Hossain, R. S. (1911). *Sultana's dream and other writings*. Calcutta: Sakhawat Memorial Press.
11. Begum, M. (1898). *Tahzib-e-Niswan*. Lahore: Munshi Gulab Singh and Sons.
12. Abdullah, S. (1904). *Education of Muslim girls*. Aligarh: Aligarh Institute Press.
13. Khan, S. A. (1871). *Causes of the Indian revolt*. Aligarh: Aligarh Institute Press.
14. Madusudan, P. (2011). *Women, education and social change in India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
15. Padmawati, D. (2008). *Women and education in India: Issues and challenges*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
16. Kapoor, A. M. (1999). *Women and development in India*. New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers.
17. Heimsath, C. H. (2015). *Indian nationalism and Hindu social reform*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
18. Sarkar, T. (1992). The Hindu wife and the Hindu nation: Domesticity and nationalism in nineteenth-century Bengal. *Studies in History*, 8(2), 213–235.