

A Case Study of Hobart Muslim Girls School, Royapettah, Chennai (1873-2023)

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Abstract

Education is an eye-opener for every woman, to the practical challenges faced by her in society and serves as a weapon to overcome them in a more dignified procedure. Education as the means of empowerment of women can bring about a confident attitudinal change for women in society. In the present communal politics, the education of Muslim women is highly targeted and frequent attempts have been made to further marginalize Muslim women and their education. In the recent past, the Fundamental Rights of Muslims particularly women's education were curtailed in the name of the *Hijab* controversy. Though the Indian Constitution provided the Right to Equality, it is not fully practiced. But in the historical past during the colonial period, an attempt was made by the British government to provide education to purdah observing Muslim women in Madras city. Governor of Madras Lord Hobart started a primary school for purdah observing Muslim girls in 1873, considered a milestone in the history of the education of Muslim women. This historical model school for purdah observing Muslim girls exist today and successfully provides education to Muslim women in Chennai. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the History of the Hobart Muslim Girls School, Royapettah, Chennai, and the contribution of the school to the socio-cultural development of the Muslim community over the past 150 years.

Keywords: Muslim-Women-Purdah-Education-Empowerment-Colonial period-History.

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The State of Education Among Muslims Women

Educationally, Muslims represent one of the most backward communities in the country. Muslim girls and women lag behind their male counterparts and among women of all other communities. They were suffering from a higher rate of illiteracy. Education as an

institution did not percolate to the common women, as in other communities, resulting in illiterate, ignorant, and custom-bound timid Muslim women in society.¹ According to the Census of 1871, about 15.8 percent of Hindu girls of school-going age are under instructions while only 1.2 percent of Muslim girls were under instructions.² Separate schools for girls were very negligible. Later female education was introduced and encouraged to such an extent that literacy came to be recognized as a desirable accomplishment. It was stated that with the spread of education and the process of modernization, a notable change had occurred in the social position of Muslim women.³ Even women servants, who were long accustomed to serving in zenanas modified their language style.⁴ On the other hand, the scarcity of empirical data in this regard prompts stereotyped judgment on their issue. Instead of all these drawbacks, Muslim women had shown remarkable excellence in literary spheres in various instances.

Historical Development of Muslim Women's Education

In south India, the Nawabs of Carnatic were the patrons of women's education. There existed a separate Maktab to promote the education for girls with the boys up to the primary level. The daughters of the royal household and nobles received education through learned women and distinguished old scholars. Many books were written to cater to the special needs of women. Moulana Baqir Agah wrote religious works in Urdu for the enlightenment of women. His daughter Kaneez Fathima was a distinguished scholar, who mastered several disciplines. His work *Rauzatul Islam* was composed for his daughter in particular and the women in general. *Riaz-un-Niswan* in Urdu, the work of Qazi Badruddowlah, deals with the legal and religious problems relating to women. *Risala-e-Dur*, *Ahkam-e-Iddat* was specially written on widows indicates that the moral, material, and intellectual needs of the women were not altogether ignored.

Early Educational Efforts of the British Government

The British government started an Arabic Madrasa within the precincts of Fort St George in Madras and appointed suitable teachers to educate students in Arabic and Persian. Many Arabic and Persian works were published by this institution.⁵ British rule marked a sense of widespread neglect and decay in the field of indigenous education, which was evident from Thomas Munroe's Report on Madras Presidency Data, which remarked that the main causes of the low state of education among Muslims in Madras were the little encouragement which it received from the Government, the minimal demand for it by the community and above all, the poverty of the people.⁶

Opinion of British towards Muslim Education

Since the years 1813 and 1833, education had been passing through an experimental period. Certain controversial reports were prepared by colonial authorities, who sought to create an impression that Muslims were opposed to the idea of Western education and that Muslim women were prevented from being educated.⁷ The policy of suppression and repression having failed, the government decided in 1870, to change the method of their approach towards the Muslims, and to make them palatable pills of 'New Education' acceptable they have surrogated an announcement of 'Special State Patronage of Muslim Education'.

Government Encouragement for Muslim Education

Till 1870 the British looked upon the Muslims as the chief conspirators against their government. As the Hindus got themselves educated and entered Government service in good numbers, they became competitors to the British. They demanded more share for themselves in the higher services. This phenomenon forced the British to change their policy toward the

Muslims and they encouraged the Muslims in education.⁸ Hence the government remodeled its policy on education toward Muslims in general and issued instructions to the provincial government to take necessary steps to promote education among Muslims.⁹ It was pushed forward by the successive viceroys Mayo and Northbrook to lead to a new alliance with India's Muslim elites.¹⁰

The initiation of social progress of Muslims was due to the efforts and frequent deliberation to the government of India in 1871 by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Justice Ameer Ali, who drew the attention of the government to the backwardness of Muslims in Education. The backward condition of education, among Muslims gained the attention of Earl of Mayo, he passed the Government of India Resolution No. 300 at Simla on 7th August 1871, which was considered as the first of the series of measures adopted by the Government for the encouragement of education among Muslims.¹¹

The Muslims of Madras Presidency was not too large, as to follow up Viceroy Mayo's resolution of 7th August 1871 on Muslim education. To change this situation, Lord Hobart created the so-called system of 'special agency' in 1872, by which special schools were established for Muslims in areas where they were in large numbers to cater to their particular educational needs.¹² A Memorandum was laid down on 29th July 1872 by Governor Hobart, which turned out as a major policy on Muslim education and employment, especially a turning point in Muslim women's education over the next four decades.¹³ Accordingly, Muslims were the first to be treated as a backward class in Madras presidency.¹⁴

Special Attention to Muslim Women's Education

A school for purdah observing Muslim women was initiated by Lord Hobart, Governor of Madras in 1873. Due to his death soon after, in his memory, Lady Hobart formally started the same school and renamed it Hobart School, in the old building in the present Royapettah Post Office, Big Garden, Madras, in 1873.¹⁵ Later the school was shifted to Royapettah, Madras, on the campus of Shah Sawar Jung Garden, which was occupied by Humayun Jah Bahadur. The school was located in a palatial mansion and one important part of the building was considered as 'Palace Building'. The vast ground surrounding the building was used as a playing ground for the school children, which covers an area of eight acres of land. It is one of the pioneer schools in Tamil Nadu.¹⁶ She collected huge donations from Begum of Nawab of Arcot in the form of money and a palace building, where the school still exists and remained the only school for them throughout the British rule.¹⁷ It started as a primary school; it then became a middle school and finally a higher secondary school. Teacher training and industrial training for the Muslim girls were also added to the school. By establishing this school, the government tried to provide every type of education to the Purdah observing Muslim women, who were very much lagging in education. It was a pioneer school in the presidency and was placed under the care of an efficient superintendent who took a keen and abiding interest in the cause of Muslim female education and provided every kind of encouragement to the girls who joined the school.

Establishment of Hobart Muslim Girls School in Madras

Mary Lady Hobart took a warm personal interest in the education of Muslim women because they were found more backward in the state than those of other races.¹⁸ Lady Hobart conceived the idea of a school where the strictest Muslims could be as sure of seclusion from male intrusion as behind the purdah.¹⁹ In January 1875, a committee presided over by Mary Lady Hobart discussed the question of the education of Muslim girls, and proposed to encourage it by promoting the establishment of schools in which the girls were to be taught about their languages, like Arabic, Persian, Hindustani, and needlework, and other industrial

skills of every description and other occupations.²⁰ The proposal also included a plan to start a teacher's training program at the school. Accordingly, on 16th April 1875, formally the school was opened at Royapettah, Madras by the Prince of Arcot with 24 pupils.²¹ The news of the inauguration of the school hit the headlines in Muslim newspapers. They eulogized the services of Lady Hobart to the cause of Muslim women's education and pointed out her initiative and friendly intercourse between the native and European ladies.²² Muslims applied for the admission for their daughters and the number of applications was disproportionate to the seats available.²³

Philanthropic Grants to Hobart School

The Hobart School received generous land grants and buildings from the Nawab of Arcot, Mir Humayun Jah Bahadur. He granted a 'Palace Building' for the establishment of the school. Mary Lady Hobart gave the school a donation of Rs.10000/-.²⁴ On 7th December 1875 Ruler of Thanjavur, Tulsaji, and granddaughter Vijaya Mohana Muktambal, the Princess of Thanjavur visited the institution and donated Rs. 7000/- towards its support to run the school.²⁵ The school received a large Grant-in-aid from the government and was also supported by donations and subscriptions. The rules from admission to attendance in the Hobart school were about as liberal as circumstances will admit Muslims receive an allowance for a guardian in addition to stipends.

Although most of the children belonged to the poorer class, their parents do not allow them to walk through the streets even in purdah and it was found necessary to hire five carts with female attendants to convey the students to and from the school.²⁶ The cost of this exceeded the salaries of all the teachers.²⁷ Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency for the year 1879-80 states that the total increase in the number of girls in schools was satisfactory, as also is that of Muslim pupils.²⁸

Hobart Elementary School

The school was started as an elementary school for educating Muslim girls, the school catered to the educational needs of the poor Muslim girls of Royapettah, Mirzapet, and Triplicane.²⁹ In the year 1879, there were only 157 girls in the Lower Primary section in Hobart School. The Hobart School was raised to a high school in the year 1880 and in that there were 33 in Upper Primary and 126 in Lower Primary section in Hobart Muslim School.³⁰ According to the Report on Census of 1891 a gradual increase in Muslim women's education than in Hindu women. The enrolment of Muslim girls in elementary education increased to 0.59 percent while the Hindu girl's enrolment rate is 0.22 percent next to Christian girls' enrolment rate of 7.43 percent. The literary rate of Muslim girls increased to 1.04 percent while the literary rate of Hindu girls is 0.48 percent, next to Christian girls at 7.12 percent.³¹ This remarkable increase in Muslim girls' educational growth shows the change of interest of the Muslim community in educating the girls.

Hobart Secondary Education

The Hobart school which has long remained as a middle school was originally a lower elementary school, in a few years, the school became a complete higher elementary school with a training department attached to it. The school was transferred from primary to Middle school in 1887-88. Later it was raised to the Secondary grade in response to the recommendations of the progressive elements in the Muslim community.³²

Development of the Hobart School

Remarkably, the Hobart School was the only secular school in the country for Muslim girls who had done much useful work. English was added slowly to its curriculum of instruction and its studies were left to the option of the parents and guardians of the

students.³³ The Hobart School which figured amongst the English Schools in 1881-82 appeared in the vernacular list.³⁴

A new department was opened by Princess of Arcot in November, which led to a rapid increase in attendance. It ranked as a Departmental School because the government assured the management of the entire school.³⁵ Accordingly, the government took over the school in the year 1889.³⁶ Since then it had been constituted on government institution. The government to accelerate the progress of Muslim women's education initiated several measures such as liberal grants, the appointment of additional female staff in both teaching and non-teaching sections, and the creation of women inspecting agency, etc. As a result of such steps taken there was some visible progress in education. It also liberated many women from the social custom and bondages of their men.

In course of the development of secondary education, the lower secondary education progressed well but higher secondary education did not make much progress. Accordingly, there was a noteworthy increase in the number of Muslim girls receiving secondary education. Their number more than doubled over time.³⁷

In the year 1905 Lower Secondary Examination was abolished. It was replaced by ESLC, Elementary School Leaving Certificate, for students who successfully underwent five or more years of education. The certificate was issued based on performance in the examination and on the pupil's record in the school.³⁸ There was a change in the policy and in 1906 the old Lower Secondary School was developed with a definite aim of fitting the girls for life. They had an elastic curriculum that could be made to suit all types of racial and local circumstances.

In 1920, the school was converted into a High school i.e., in this new section Fourth Form was started. In 1922 this school became a complete Higher Secondary school. The same Fourth Form then became a Sixth Form. In the same way after the opening of the Sixth Form, Secondary Grade Teacher Training Section also opened. Thus, the Hobart School was recognized as Government Hobart Secondary and Training School.³⁹ The Government Hobart School remained the only secondary school in the Presidency chiefly intended for Muslim girls. The school had increased in strength from 166 in the year 1922 to 285 in the year 1927.

Hobart Teacher Training School

The progress of Muslim female education depends almost entirely on an adequate supply of trained Muslim female teachers, and as this was the only institution in the Presidency in which Muslim young women were trained as school Mistress.⁴⁰ In the year 1885, a training class for Muslim teachers was added to this school. The Government Hobart Training School is partly supported by the endowment of Rs. 10,000/- from the gift of Lady Mary Hobart, which was exclusively intended for Muslims.⁴¹ A training college for mistresses was recognized as one of the most satisfactory features in the educational schemes of south India.⁴²

A Training section was added with the help of additional aid from the Government.⁴³ This was done to provide a livelihood to poor Muslim girls and widows and to further the progress of education of women. It was generally felt that widows would be suited for the teaching profession. Initially, the Hobart Training School was successful and a maximum number of girls were trained. Gradually the strength began to decline because the girls trained were not able to get jobs as they wanted to stay in the city and not go out of the city for employment. The government took up many measures in the progress of Teacher Training education of Muslim women. The Muslim community responded to the efforts of the

government and allows the children to take advantage of the facilities offered for their education.

Hobart Industrial school

Vocational courses for Muslim girls were thought of quite early, during British rule. It was done more to help the poor Muslim girls and widows to eke out a decent living for themselves and their dependents. Some vocational courses appealed to the poorer classes and middle classes, as they provide them with livelihood within their social and religious setup. Also, a part of the work done by the children was sold to meet the expense. Whenever necessary the pupils used their proficiency with the needle as a means of their livelihood.⁴⁴

The Industrial section for Muslim girls was started in 1880, and an Industrial department was opened in Hobart School. The Industrial section provided skills training to the Muslim girls in embroidery, gold braid-weaving, and lace-making. The industrial section of the Hobart School was not improved in numbers; an exhibition was conducted by the Madras Branch of the National Indian Association from 4th to 10th January 1890, visited by Princess of Arcot. The object of the exhibition was to stimulate native ladies and school children in such useful occupations as needlework, drawing, and writing. In the year 1894-95 the Report on Public Instruction described the organization of an Industrial department that the school made good and steady progress throughout the British rule.

Girls Hostel for Hobart School

In those days the girls coming for getting training have to face a lot of difficulties. The government was aware that the education among the Muslim women was very backward as compared with advanced communities, owing to the absence of Higher Elementary schools and Government High Schools with hostel conveniences for Muslim girls in the district. So, it became necessary for the establishment of one women's hostel. The government accepted the request of the school authorities and provided one hostel within the campus of the school.⁴⁵ In that hostel, girls were admitted not only from outside of the Madras city but also the girls who were from within the city based on certain difficulties. Within this short period, the hostel ceased to exist in 1922 as the number of boarders was only 8 and the charges were consequently high.⁴⁶

Establishment of Government College for Muslim Women in Hobart School

In the year 1946, the government started a separate Government College for Muslim women on the premises of Hobart Secondary and Training School for Muslim Girls.⁴⁷ It was a separate college for Muslim women and was the first of its kind in the province. Based on the recommendation of the University of Madras, the government proposed to admit sixty students in the junior intermediate class and forty students in the Junior B.A. class. Among the total seats, 75% were reserved for Muslims.⁴⁸ Miss L. Philips who was then working as Lecturer in Lady Willington Training College, Madras, was appointed as the principal of the Government College for Muslim Women. On her retirement on 27th August 1946, Mrs. T.J. Cletus, Lecturer of Queen Mary's College appointed as the next principal.⁴⁹ In the year 1948, the government lent the buildings on the campus of Hobart School to establish a college for Muslim women for five years. This charge was taken over by Ethiraj, a leading lawyer, and the college was named after him, as 'Ethiraj College'.⁵⁰ Accordingly in the year 1951, the College for Muslim women was shifted to the Victoria Crescent in Egmore.⁵¹

Contributions of the Hobart School

Madras continues to be the most satisfactory state so far as education is concerned. The history of Hobart school says that this school was started when Muslim girls were ignorant and incapable of understanding the change that was taking place in the society. As a

pioneer and only Higher Secondary School for Muslim Women run by the government, it has achieved great success in every field for 150 years, both in academic and non-academic activities. Though the stage of development of education of Muslim women was very far behind that of the Hindu women, considerable progress had been made.⁵² It is a marked advance for Muslim girls who behind the purdah pursue their education independently and regularly in the safe speculations of their zenana, purdah, and passes their examination and was awarded their higher degree. This general awakening in the girl's education was the result of many favorable influences over a long period and has steadily led to progress. It has a highly remarkable place in the history of Muslim Women's education. At present this school faces many challenges due to the marginal politics of the present scenario.

End notes

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