

# THE HINDU

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## Still in the last row

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LAGGING BEHIND: Educational disadvantage constrains social mobility and worsens exclusion and marginalisation. Photo: S. Subramaniam

The Hindu

### ***Muslim children continue to be marginalised in both school enrolment and completion, says a study***

As another election draws near and political parties machinate to secure their vote banks, perhaps some who are far-sighted enough will look to India's young Muslims. Those under 19 years of age form over 50 per cent of the country's 180 million Muslims, a number that is growing. Yet, whether these young Muslims can play a part in the nation's ambition of becoming a global player or not will depend on the extent to which they benefit from the growth process and broader, social reform initiatives.

That Muslims in India are disadvantaged was set out unequivocally in the Sachar Commission report in 2006. Between 1993-4 and 2007-8, the UNDP also found that Muslim urban poverty declined only 1.7 points whereas urban poverty levels generally fell from 32.4 per cent to 14.5 per cent. More significantly, educational disparities between Muslims and others, have not been decreasing as fast as they should have.

### **Findings**

In our research on 246,389 children from 11 States (the full text is at: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp6329.pdf>), we find that, overall, India has made progress in plugging the school enrolment gap between upper-caste Hindu children and other children, from 1983 to 2004. The enrolment gap between Scheduled Caste (SC) children and upper caste Hindu children declined from 17 per cent points in 1983 to one per cent point in 2004. In contrast, the enrolment gap between Hindu and Muslim children continued to persist at four per cent points in 2004. Importantly, while most States in our study show a decrease in Hindu-Muslim enrolment gaps, the gap remains significant in States like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar with large Muslim populations.

However, school enrolment is only half the story. School completion rates, which make the real difference to a child's future show persistently larger gaps. This is not surprising because school completion takes more sustained reform. We find that for every 10 years of schooling completed by Hindu children, Muslim children only completed 8.3 years in 2004. This pattern holds good for both boys and girls. The gaps in completion rates are significant in every State in the study except Tamil Nadu.

There is a popular perception that social conservatism is the cause of the educational disadvantage among Indian Muslims. However, we find that this does not seem to be so. One important signifier is the boy-girl difference in education. We found that the education gap between boys and girls in Muslim families is smaller than in Hindu families.

Rather than conservatism, this seems to suggest a gap in public policy attention to Muslim children's education. The gap between Muslim and SC children also suggests the same thing. Muslim children had better school completion rates

than SC/ST children in 1983. However, our research shows that by 2004, when the impact of policies targeted at these groups (first articulated in the National Policy on Education in 1986 and then reiterated in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan more recently) starts to be felt, Muslim boys had begun to lag behind SC boys in grade completion. Importantly, underlining the case that this is problem of public policy inattention rather than “culture,” the comparison of the boy-girl difference between communities remains unchanged. While more SC boys complete primary (as well as secondary) school than Muslim boys, SC girls continue to lag behind Muslim girls.

### **Tamil Nadu’s achievement**

Tamil Nadu is the only State in our study that has successfully closed the Hindu-Muslim and gender gaps both in school enrolment and completion. It is not coincidental that respective State governments have given school education greater attention than many other States. Tamil Nadu pioneered India’s Mid-Day Meal school programme in the 1960s, three decades earlier than most States, and more recently has made a better job of operationalising the District Primary Education Project and its follow-up, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

Much of the difference in Hindu-Muslim educational outcomes relates to Muslim families being poorer and larger as well as to parents within these families being less educated than those of other groups. Having said this, even when we compare children from similar economic and family backgrounds, the Muslim schooling disadvantage does not disappear. Change, it seems, can only come if future education policy initiatives explicitly target Muslim children and address the specificities of the causes of their disadvantage.

Educational disadvantage impacts the long-term prospects of any community, by constraining social mobility and worsening exclusion, marginalisation and alienation. As 13 per cent of the population, Muslims are a significant minority who can help deliver India’s future growth, if only they were given an even chance.

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