

Muslim Women's Education in Vellore District of Tamil Nadu in 19th Century

Mohammad Osman Pasha* and K. Murugan

PG & Research Department of History, Islamiah College (Autonomous), Vaniyambadi, Tamil Nadu

Corresponding author E-mail: osmanpashaou@gmail.com

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Abstract

Vellore District holds a historical significance and also it occupies a distinct place in the field of education, for its several educational institutions right from the elementary level to colleges. These educational institutions are run by both State and Central Government and some are maintained by the private managements. It wouldn't be wrong on our part if we call it an educational hub. This study will explain about the importance of Muslim women's education in Vellore District of Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Tamil Nadu; Vellore, Education; Civilization; Mobile Universities; Arabia; Prophet Muhammed

Introduction

Vellore possesses a fascinating background in the history of Tamil Nadu. It holds a fusion of ancient and rich cultural heritage of Dravidian Civilization. Since ancient times the District has been famous for its economic charms and strategic importance. The modern Vellore District holds a historical significance and also it occupies a distinct place in the field of education, for its several educational institutions right from the elementary level to colleges. These educational institutions are run by both State and Central Government and some are maintained by the private managements. It wouldn't be

wrong on our part if we call it an educational hub. This study will focus on the importance of women's education in Vellore District.

Education for women is one of the most critical areas of empowerment of women. Offering the right to higher education for girls, provides much greater power of enabling them to make better choices in life and move towards the development of herself and her family. A woman is the one who is liable either to produce good citizens or bad.

Women undertake a greater responsibility as mothers. That is why they are most reverently termed as 'Mobile Universities'. A woman can pass on the best of her knowledge to her generation only if she is educated and possesses the knowledge of right things. Without being educated how is it possible for a woman to nurture her children in the right direction. If a man is educated, the benefit of his education is limited to him.

When a woman is educated a whole generation avails its benefit. The major drawback of uneducated mothers is neither they support the family financially nor do they bring up their wards efficiently. So at least providing the basic education for girls is very essential for the growth of families and development of countries. We all might have heard that "Behind every successful man there is a woman". But now the days have changed. We can get the instances to prove that there is a man behind a successful woman. Earlier the girls were not allowed to acquire education or go to schools where boys studied.

In Islam right to education was given around 1400 years ago. Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) had declared, "The pursuit of knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim male and female". As a result of his declaration it was noted that every man and woman rendered his or her contribution in the field of education. Slavery was common in Arabia. Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) gave the right to education even to the slave girls of the Arabia.

He gave the best education to his daughter Hazrath Fathima made her an example in front of the world that there should be no preference for the boys to the girls in the matter of education. Both hold the equal right to acquire education. Hence it is proved that Islam is not an impediment for women from being educated and being successful in the life.

To overcome this impediment separate schools for girls were opened not only in Vellore District but also in other districts. Most of the Muslim parents did not prefer to join their daughters to co-education schools because of the concept of Pardha. Great thanks to the mindset of the parents, who at least realized the need of education for their daughters and sent them to girls' schools.

As a result the due importance is given to girls' education unlike earlier days. Gone are the days when the women were referred as weaker sex or inferior to men. Even now in rural areas girl's education

is not given much importance particularly the Muslim community which has its mind set that the girls are meant for doing only house hold chores, though seeking knowledge is the fundamental duty of every man and woman.

Development of Muslim Girls' Educational Institutions in Vellore District

A majority of population in Vellore District consists of Muslims. The pathetic part is most of the Muslims are living below poverty line. These parents do not send their wards to school and retain them at home so that they can help in their work to earn a little more money.

The establishment of schools in Vellore District is as follows

Municipal Muslim Girls' Primary School, Ramanaikan Palayam (Rahmathpala, Vellore)

This school was founded by the local Muslims of the District in the year 1923 and was recognized by the Government in the same year¹. The statistical data of the school says that there were only 50 students totally in the classes from I to V Standard and they were handled by 3 teachers. Presently there are 200 students and 6 teachers including a Tamil Teacher who run the school. The school follows the syllabus prescribed by the Tamil Nadu State Government and the medium of instruction is Urdu. Most of the Girl students, who complete their primary school do not go to High School. If we see the year of establishment almost one Century is going to be completed but the increase in strength is only four fold.

Arcot: Madrasa-e-Yomia, Arcot

In Arcot the one and only Muslim Girls' educational institution is Madrasa-e-Yomia. Initially the school was started in 1926² as an orphanage for Muslim boys and girls. The Nawab of Carnatic donated endowments for the maintenance of this orphanage. In the beginning it functioned in a rental building but it was soon shifted to a building donated by the Prince of Arcot. The institution rendered Primary Education to the girls of Arcot and its suburbs. In 1960 it was undertaken by the Municipality of Arcot and the name was changed as Municipal Girls' Elementary School. The school functions even today with the aid provided by the Prince of Arcot. Mr. T. Mohammed Rizwanullah is the Headmaster of the school along with two more staff.

Municipal Muslim Girls' Primary School, Saidapet, Vellore

This is a small school established by the Muslims of Vellore District before 1930 AD but it took nine years to get the Government recognition². It is an Urdu Medium School with three Urdu staff and one Tamil teacher. The girls from the nearby areas study in this school and get benefitted.

Municipal Girls' Primary School, Dharnampet, Gudiyattam

The school was found in the year 1935 and it was recognized by the British Government in 1940³ and presently it is managed by the town's municipality. The total strength of the school is only 150 students and they are taught by five teachers. After completing the primary level education only few girls pursue their education and join High Schools. The drop outs help their parents in the Beedi making due to their poor financial backwardness.

Panchayath Union Urdu Girls' Primary School, Valathur

Valathur is a small town situated 8 Kms away from Gudiyattam. 80% of the total population consists of Muslims. It was founded and recognized by the Tamil Nadu State Government in the year 1938⁴. The school functions from Standard I to V with only a strength of 50 students who are guided by two teachers and Janab Sirajuddin Sahib as the Headmaster of the school. The poverty and occupation of Beedi rolling restricts the parents to send their children to school. The school is under the direct control of the AEEO (Additional Elementary Educational Officer).

Municipal Muslim Girls' Primary School, Thazyatham, Gudiyattam

The school came into existence in the year 1939 and was recognized by the State Government in the year 1948⁵. The school was started with the strength of 50 students and no progress had been noted in the increase of strength. Presently more than hundred girls are studying in this school. The reason behind this is the poverty and Beedi occupation of the parents. The subjects taught in this school are Urdu, English, Mathematics, Science and Social Science with moral education. The medium of instruction is Urdu.

Madrassa-e-Niswan, Melvisharam

This institution is managed by Anjuman-e-Ansarul Islam⁶ which focuses on religious education, and it was founded in the year 1941⁷. Currently Janab Malack Mohammed Hashim Sahib is the President of this Madrasa and Secretary of the Madrasa is Malack Akbar Hussain Sahib who are the backbone of this religious institution.

To provide the religious education to the Muslim Girls of the locality was the supreme objective of the institution. Presently Janaba Shakira Sahiba is the Headmistress of the school where around 500 students are getting educated in the guidance of 27 trained teachers. The salary of the staff and other maintenance expenditure is overcome through the donations of the well wishers and other stake holders.

Madrasa-e-Niswan Aided Muslim School, Mel Alathur

Mel Alathur is a small village within Gudiyattam Taluk in Vellore District. It is situated 32 Km towards west from the District Headquarters and 3 Km from Gudiyattam. The objective of establishing the school was to impart both secular and religious knowledge in the year 1965 by local Muslims established the school. In the year 1968 the school was recognized by Government of Tamil Nadu for Classes I to VIII⁸. Janab Noorul Ameen Sahib is the Correspondent of the school who runs the school with the assistance of Janaba Qamar Taj Begum as the Headmistress accompanied with 24 teaching and 6 non-teaching staff. They strive hard as a team towards the progress of the institution as well as the Muslim girls' welfare. The school has a separate prayer hall to promote Namaz and 13 class rooms. AMES (Ambur Muslim Educational Society) undertakes this devoted service of establishing educational institutions right from Primary to Collegiate level since one hundred year.

Nusrathul Islam Girls Higher Secondary School, Pernambut

There are many schools that had been established for boys and they even started paying attention towards the Girls' education too. Nusrathul Islam was established in the year 1970 and was upgraded as Higher Secondary School in the year 1988⁹. Janab Mohammed Ihsan Sahib is the Correspondent of the school who is striving to improve the status of Girls' education in Vellore District. The highest of all, the school has a total strength of 1350 girls with 39 staff who mould and nurture the students with both secular and religious teachings.

The school has an infrastructure of 30 class rooms and well equipped laboratories for Physics, Chemistry and Biology as well as Computer Science. The medium of instruction is Urdu and it has an equipped library with 5012 books. There are 16 computers in the computer lab for teaching and learning. The school office functions with five non-teaching staff.

Urdu Aided Girls Middle School in Baqiyath Street

The school holds a considerable strength of 290 girls. The syllabus recommended by the State Government is being followed here along with religious instructions like recitation of Holy Quran and Hadith. In spite of having Urdu as the medium of instruction with the religious teaching, most parents do not send their girls to school after Standard V or once they attain puberty¹⁰.

The school was established in the year 1974¹¹ as primary school and soon it was upgraded as Middle School by the State Government. The credit of foundation and maintenance of the school goes to the undaunted efforts of Janab Anwar Sahib, the Honourable Correspondent and General Secretary of the school. Presently Mrs. Shakeela Banu is heading the school with her sincere attitude towards the development of the school.

Urdu Girls' Aided Primary School, Pernambut

The school was started in the year 1974 at Tipu Street in Pernambut. It is an Urdu Medium school functioning with Class I to V. Janaba Najmunnisa is the Headmistress of the school who has taken the school towards progress with the increased strength of 420 students on roll. 8 teaching 2 non-teaching staff are employed to meet the academic and administrative needs of the school. It is a State Government aided school which functions over an area of 7100 Square feet¹².

Madrasa-e-Niswan, Vellore

In Vellore, two schools named as Madarsa-e-Niswan were founded. One is in Ramanaikan Palayam established in the year 1975 and the other one is located at the Baqiyyath Street, opposite to the Baqiyyath Salihath Arabic College. These schools are very famous for providing religious teaching and for following Islamic tradition in case of uniform. Most of the girls of Vellore and surrounding town study in Madarsa-e-Niswan since they are allowed to be in Pardah. Even the female teachers, who work here, wear the Purdah. They also conduct Namaz as an important part of the curriculum. Since the school is run by private management they collect monthly subscriptions from the affluent. The school also owns a private transport facility for the girls and Nagibas (Conductress) for providing the safe conveyance to the girls. Madrasa-e-Niswan has recently introduced the Department of *Hifz* (memorizing the Holy Quran), which is helping the students in memorizing the Quran.

There is a Tailoring Institute to train educated and poor Muslim women to stitch clothes and design them. The Falah-e-Millath Trust along with some representatives who have dedicated themselves for the cause of women's welfare from different localities is running this tailoring school. Every day two batches of girls learn tailoring from a lady instructor.

To meet the existing demands of the parents for the protection of their daughters and for the purpose of Purdah, separate girls schools were established in Vellore District in different parts, but these schools were only up to Standard X and the girls had to either move on to the co-education schools or to schools of secular education run by other communities and by Government where Islamic teaching was not included.

The Government Muslim Higher Secondary School at Vellore, St. Mary's Higher Secondary School, Bala Vidhya Mandhir Higher Secondary School and Shristi Matriculation Higher Secondary Schools are the ones that offer higher education. And to the amazement 75% of Muslim girls continue their education by joining these co-education along with the boys which is highly condemned by most of the Ulemas and parents.

The remaining 25% of girls who are not sent for higher studies remain backward in the field of education and this is the major drawback in the developing path of education growth among Muslim women in Vellore District.

Gudiyattam

Not much educational growth is found in Gudiyattam since most of the population consists of Muslims and involve in the Beedi making. Though Gudiyattam is a Taluk Headquarters and a cosmopolitan town most of the population suffers poor economic status. Girls of Gudiyattam are not sent to the schools for they are compelled by their parents to assist them in rolling Beedies. Hence the rate of literacy of this place is very low among Muslim girls while compared to other surrounding areas.

Rameeza Oriental (Arabic) Girls' High School, Pernambut

The school was established as a Primary School in the year 1986 and later upgraded as a High School. The strength of the school is 380 students on roll with 8 teachers and 2 clerks for administrative purposes. Janaba Mahmood Begum is the Headmistress of the school who works dedicatedly for the progress of the school and its students. Janab V. Khaleel Ahmed Sahib is the Honourable Correspondent of the school who had devoted his life for the welfare of Muslim girls' education. The school has a separate prayer hall for Namaz and 14 well ventilated class rooms. Students are admitted from Class to VI to X and the school was recognized from the Department of School Education of Tamil Nadu Government¹⁰. There is provision for 'Hifz' that is, learning of the Holy Quran by heart with due emphasis upon *Tajwid*, the art of Arabic accent and pronunciation.

Madarsa –E-Saleema Niswan Middle School, Gudiyattam

Madarsa-e-Saleema Niswan Middle School is a non-aided middle school managed by a Muslim Management. It was established in the year 1997 keeping into considerations, the expectations of Muslim parents for their girls. Primarily the medium of instruction in this school is Urdu but Tamil and other languages are taught as second language, the ratio of student teacher is 31:1 in this school.

The school aims to provide the best learning environment to 248 girls from Standard I to VIII with the help of 11 trained teachers who guide them and inculcate good morals and qualities in them. The Purdah Sysem, *Deeniyath* teaching and afternoon Namaz Zuhar is followed up punctually. It has a library with around 100 books and computer lab with 10 working computers which are used for teaching the basic computer knowledge to the students.

Pernambut

Pernambut is a municipality in Vellore District, and a village headquarters. Pernambut is the second most populated town of Vellore District after the separation of Tirupattur and Ranipet District with a population of 51,271 as per 2011 Census. Leather Tanning Industry is the source of income of this locality. It is even called as ‘Leather Tanning City of Tamil Nadu¹³’.

Melvisharam

Melvisharam is a town which is densely populated with Muslims. The people of Visharam are highly pious and strictly follow Islam. For more than 300 years the women of Melvisharam had been learning Quran and trained in religious teachings.

In the beginning the girls were taught at their residents and later in mosques which had been established in the town. It was in the second half of the 20th Century when they realized the increasing need of education for the women and girls and laid the foundation of various institutions to teach both religious and secular education.

The area which had been once a war field had developed into an educational hub of South India in due course of time and brought a major transformation in the field of education. There is a proverb in Urdu which gives the following meaning, “Where there is life, there is world”. The very first initiative taken for the welfare of women was to give her the right to live. Even after that a woman’s life was not less than a bonded labour who spent her whole life under the dominancy of men in life, first her father, then her husband and even in her old age she has to abide by the dominant attitude of her male children¹⁴.

Thus a woman’s life in the ancient period ended with this above mentioned role. It was the advent of Islam which clearly mentioned through the light of the Holy Quran and Hadith that “Seeking of knowledge is essential for both men and women”.

The implementation of this verse resulted in the eradication of illiteracy from the Muslim society especially through promoting women’s education. The realization of parents for the need of secular and Western education had made it a reality that most of the girls and women in Vellore District started living a civilized life through their education. The contribution of Entrepreneurs and Philanthropists of both the communities resulted in the establishment of various schools and colleges in Vellore District.

The State Government has also evinced its great interest in rendering recognition to the elementary Girls’ Schools and High Schools. Though there were no separate schools for Muslim Girls in higher secondary education, the parents sent their daughters to co-education schools for the purpose of completing their Higher Secondary Education. Later that there were many women’s colleges in which they sought the admission retaining the dress code and modesty of Islam.

Through this study we have to come to a conclusion that there is a considerable growth in women's education in Vellore District from the mid of 20th Century until now. In the early days religious education was imparted in the Makthabs and Madrasas – the institutions purely meant for teaching Arabic, Persian and Urdu. The recitation of Holy Quran and the study of Hadith was the main focus of these institutions.

The new stream of education in form of secular and Western education was introduced with the rise of British rule in India. It was essential for the growth of a society or state to learn Western education for the scientific and professional advancement. Though religious education is a complete guide to the Muslims for how to spend their life in this mortal world and prepare oneself for the immortal and eternal life, the advancement of technology and English knowledge is necessary to be at the fore front in every field and sector of this highly competitive world¹⁵.

The gift of English made both the Muslim men and women with the fully equipped sense of social etiquette. Presently Muslim girls are given equal rights to acquire education along with their brother without being affected through gender variation. Most of the affluent parents, in fact the middle class parents also send their daughters to the Matriculations, CBSE schools to provide the best education. There were different phases of improvement in the mind set of the parent¹⁶.

Phase I: The parents did not allow their daughters to acquire education at all and they were restricted to learn the recitation of the Holy Quran.

Phase II: Though the parents welcomed the Western education, they preferred it for their sons but not for their daughters as they thought that worldly knowledge is not the necessity of girls. They can learn Urdu and Persian along with learning Holy Quran and Hadith.

Phase III: The broadmindedness of parents allowed their daughters to seek secular education but from the Government and free education centres. They did not prefer to spend on the education of girls as they spent for their sons, who will earn the money for them in future.

Phase IV: This is the current scenario of the Muslim community. If a family can afford to pay fee in a private institution, it sends both the son and daughter to the same standard of education. Discrimination of boys and girls has been wiped out from the present world. There is no question of spending equal money on girls' education as on the boys. It has become a mandatory right of girls to get equal benefits that a boy enjoys in the field of education. Infact girls have over taken boys in studies and acquiring better positions due to their sincerity and devotion towards their career. This phase of Muslim parents' attitude need to be applauded.

Initial steps taken for the growth of education

Elementary school education which is the fundamental right of every child doesn't stop with primary school, but it has to be resumed with high school and Higher Secondary. It has been noted that the establishment of primary schools concentrated much over the native language and Western education. They trained the in-service teachers to teach the secular education.

The establishment and growth of primary schools arised the necessity of founding the high schools and Higher Secondary Schools. The following of curriculum as per the demands and needs of Muslim girls promoted women's education in Vellore District. The introduction of Vocational Groups like Home Science, Dress Designing, Food Service Management, Agricultural Science, Nursing, etc. which were highly welcomed by the parents to further encourage the Higher Secondary Education.

The Government of Tamil Nadu has permitted to establish one Higher Secondary School within the distance of every 8 Km. During the recent years the Higher Secondary and College students received several benefits and concession to pursue their higher studies. They were provided with free bicycles, laptops, incentives and awards for the toppers of the Higher Secondary, etc.

Most importantly they were provided with the books of regional language in government and aided schools. In spite of all these provisions, presently Matriculations and private management schools are preferred by the parent which impart English Medium education. Subsequently the demand for Urdu Medium Schools is getting reduced and henceforth, all the Government Schools too have facilitated English Medium in the Government and aided schools.

Many Educational Trusts and Women's Welfare Societies are maintaining separate Girls' Schools in Guidyattam, Pernambut and few other towns. The role of Madarsa-e-Niswan in imparting religious education along with some Basic English knowledge for the translation purpose of Holy Quran and Hadith needs to be applauded.

Overall statistical data shows an increased literacy rate among Muslim women in Vellore District. Further it has been observed that most of the topper girls who pass out their Higher Secondary with high cut off marks do not join any professional course. This was due to the poor financial background and co-education in professional courses.

With the change of attitude and realization of socio-economic conditions the parents allow their daughters to join co-education professional courses which resulted in the emerging women Engineers, Doctors, Chartered Accountants among Muslim women. This has raised not only the social standard of the Muslim women, but also the financial status of Muslim families which had been suffering the poverty before the advent of Western and secular education.

The Muslim Educational Societies and Trusts of Modern Vellore District are now taking their lead in establishing Arts and Science Colleges for Women, never neglecting the institutions for religious teaching and also the Tailoring institutes and College of Education have been founded by the Muslim Entrepreneurs of Vellore District.

Apart from the sphere of education, the Muslim girls should be made aware of the socio-economic and political affairs that are taking place in the outer world and should be made capable of expressing their views for the rising problems. Freedom of speech and expression of ideas should be given to them as their right.

One should not ignore the religious values and teaching while marching forward in the path of professional education. Both should be balanced properly in life to retain the inter link between the creator and its creation. Secular education which is provided commonly to all the citizens is taken care by the State Government and Philanthropists. Similarly the Muslim Madras, Mosques and religious institutions should focus on imparting religious education to women as part time classes. The role of Muslim mothers is also very important to retain the interest in religious learning.

They should not go blind behind the glory of mortal prosperity. Mother's encouragement to kindle the spark of wisdom in the minds of girls is the secret behind the progress of a national. Alice Paul has rightly quoted that "There would never be a new world until women become a part of it. If women are educated, 3/4th of the country's population would be educated. Women should stop being the candles of sacrifice which burn itself to give light to others. Instead they should be the blazing torches of guidance and inspiration to the future generation".

Finally to sum up the study it has been observed keenly that Muslim educational societies and institutions of Vellore District have been rendering the best of their services in imparting both the religious, secular and professional learning in an extraordinary way to wipe out illiteracy from the Muslim Women's Society. Yet there are some measures which need to be implemented to take the Vellore District to the epitome of prosperity and Cent percent literacy rate. In this whole process of development through Western education Girls must be trained to retain and respect the values of Islam and follow the traditional customs. They should never let the liberty of being educated spoilt or misused in any way to ruin the reputation of Muslim Community.

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