A Critical Pedagogical Approach to Indian Muslim Educational Backwardness

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ABSTRACT

“Much of the current debate regarding the improvement of minority student academic achievement occurs at a level that treats education as a primarily technical issue” (Giroux 1992). Here, the paper states that beyond the methodological and mechanistic policies only the movement toward a liberating education can emancipate the oppressed people and humanize the society. The objective of this conceptual study is to analyze the educational backwardness of Muslims in India from a critical pedagogical approach. When Muslims in India are lagging far behind in the educational and literal field author believes that the liberatory and emancipatory features of critical pedagogy would give them potential to empower.

Liberating education/emancipatory education or problem posing education is a revolutionary educational concept of critical pedagogues like Paulo Frère and others. Problem posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become subjects of educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables people to overcome their false perception of reality (Ferre2000).

Liberating education is against the education as the exercise of domination and oppression. The paper also tries to analyze this emancipatory concept of education referring mostly to Paulo Frères “Pedagogy of the oppressed” and other works on critical pedagogy, explains the power relationship in education and examines the backwardness of marginalized and oppressed Muslim community from a critical pedagogical perspective.

Key words: Critical Pedagogy, Academic underachievement, Liberating education, Marginalized group, Indian Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

When India got its independence from British rule in 1947, the basic literacy skills among the adults was only around 18%. But, over the years when successive generations pursued formal education dramatic changes occurred in educational settings of India and this pathetic situation of illiteracy began to disappear little by little. This impressive growth in literacy rates of India in the last five decades has been a remarkable progress in the educational uplifting of the people. While in 1901, literate population of India was a little over 5%; by 1950 the status increased to 16%. After the independence a significant improvement was seen in the literacy rates. According to 2001 census, “three fourths of males (75.9%) and more than half of females (54.2%) were literate in India” (Govinda, 2008).

Even though the overall literacy rates of India show trends of continuous progress over the years, some of the religious minorities and marginalized sections of the society are lagging far behind in educational and literal field. There are many historical and sociological reasons, which hinder these groups to move forward. While the situation of these marginalized groups, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, has been widely studied and documented, it is only recently some studies has been conducted on the educational backwardness and underachievement of these religious minorities (Akthar & Narula, 2010). Muslim community is one of these religious minorities in India.

Educationally Muslim community is one of the most backward communities in India. Sachar Committee (2006) in its report on the Muslim backwardness states: “M uslins are at a double disadvantage with low levels of education combined with low quality of education”. In terms of literal and educational progress, the status of Muslims has been the slowest as compared to other backward tribal and religious categories. A time trend of literacy levels indicates that Indian Muslims educational gap vis-à-vis other communities has sharply increased especially after 1980’s (Borker, 2011). Many socio economic and cultural factors contribute to this backwardness and underachievement of the community in educational sector. Discrimination, oppression and political domination are some of these factors.

The role of education is unquestionable and undeniable in the empowerment of any society. And the empowerment of a certain group or society was and is one of the main concerns of educators in everywhere in the world. Several studies (Friere 1985; McLaren 1988; Kreisberg 1992) on
education have explicitly explained why empowerment is an issue of concern in educational theories and practices. Therefore, for the fulfillment of the dream of an empowered Muslim community in India, progressive efforts are essential in educational settings of the community.

Here, I try to analyze this academic underachievement of Indian Muslims and its causes from a critical pedagogical point of view. According to Paulo Freire (1974), the father of critical pedagogy, “Critical pedagogy is a radical approach to education that seeks to transform oppressive structures in society using democratic and activist approaches to teaching and learning”. The main concern of critical pedagogy is transformation of the marginalized community and empowerment of individuals faced with domination and oppression. Even though, there are many studies conducted on the educational backwardness of Indian Muslims (Basant, 2012; Khan, 2012; Borker, 2011; Sachar, 2006) studies from critical pedagogical approach are rarely found.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy as an educational theory and concept is a new phenomenon that was popularized through the works of Paulo Freire and others (McLaren, 2000). Historically, the critical theory of Frankfurt school, which was originated around 1930, was the foundational stone of the critical pedagogy (McLaren 2003). Explaining the critical theory of Frankfurt school Einser (2002) says: The ‘Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School’ argued that schools encourage dependency and a hierarchical understanding of authority and provide a distorted view of history and other ‘taken-for-grated truths’ that in turn, undermine the kind of social consciousness needed to bring about change and social transformation.

Critical pedagogy was propagated firstly by some Germans like Klaf ki, Mollenhauer, and Lempert. A rapid growth was seen and it spread soon in the Anglo-American area also. But, as McLaren (2000) mentions, the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy was Paulo Freire, a Brazilian and through his works he established the manifest relationship among education, politics, imperialism, and liberation.

Freire’s initial thinking about critical pedagogy as a liberating education was when he worked with the peasants in Brazil and experienced their lives of poverty and starvation. His experiences obliged him to form an educational system which would help these oppressed community to empower their lives and to free from oppression and domination. For Paulo Freire, Critical pedagogy aims to emancipate the oppressed people and to return them their lost voices and identities. He (2000) says: “for the learner to move from object to subject, he or she needed to be involved in dialogical action with the teacher and the materials being studied”.

Freire in his influential and powerful work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), pictured the dominating features of modern educational settings and he strongly criticized the modern educational institutions for dehumanizing students and simply reproducing the statuesque. According to him these institutions employ a ‘banking’ model of learning in which knowledge was perceived as a commodity to be transferred as much as possible from sender to receiver (teacher to student). He further states that “banking education was the greatest tool in the hands of oppressor and it is a weapon used to prepare the oppressed to adapt to their situations as oppressed rather than to challenge the situation that oppressed them”. Instead of this ‘banking’ method of instruction Freire (1970) forthput problem posing education which, as he believed, can transform the students as critically conscious.

Freire (1970/1995) sees the beginning of critical pedagogy in acknowledging that all human beings are existed in a cultural setting;

- People as beings “in a situation,” find themselves rooted in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark. They will tend to reflect on their own ‘situationality’ to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it. Human beings are because they are in a situation. And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it.

He believed that the purpose of the education is the quest of a complete humanity and critical pedagogy, as a humanizing pedagogy, serves to fulfill this pursuit.

For critical pedagogy, the aim of education is the formation of a democratic society in which each voice is equally heard and valued. A Shor (1992) states: This pedagogy challenges teachers and students to empower themselves for social change, to advance democracy and equality as they advance their literacy and knowledge. His critical methods ask teachers and students to question existing knowledge as part of the questioning habits appropriate for citizens I democracy. In Frierian classrooms teachers reject the methods which make students passive and anti-intellectual, and anti-intellectual. They do not lecture students into sleepy silence. They do not prepare students for a life of political alienation in society. Rather, Freirean educators pose critical problems to students, treat them as complicated, substantial human beings, and
encourage curiosity and activism about knowledge and the world.

As Freire (1970), Giroux (1997) and other critical pedagogues point out, the central theme in critical pedagogy is that the education systems are political. Describing this political nature of educational settings Lankshear and Lawler (1989) say: “schooling is a major structural setting wherein those classes whose interests are already dominant have access to greater power by which to maintain their dominance at the expense of subordinate class interests”. Shor (1992) explains the consequences of this hidden agenda of schools when he states: “the authoritarian classroom where students are conditioned to become passive, conformist, and obedient members of society, thus generating easily manipulated workers and passive, apathetic citizens”. This dominating agenda of schools results the underachievement of students from subordinated class. But unfortunately it is explained because of the lack of effective methods and proper teaching strategies, and the technological facilities.

EMANCIPATING PEDAGOGY AND INDIAN MUSLIM EDUCATIONAL BACKWARDNESS

Education is the key of the progress and empowerment of any society. The liberatory aspect of critical pedagogy is the powerful tool for this purpose. The major goal of critical pedagogy, according to Vandrick (1994), is “to emancipate and educate all people regardless of their gender, class, race, etc”.

According to the 2001 census, the total population of Muslims in India is 13.4%, which is calculated as 138 million of 1.028 billion of the total population. Over the years, a faster growth in the population of Muslims has been taking place than that of other socio-religious groups. The Sachar Committee report (2006), which was constituted in 2005, by Manmohan Singh, Indian Prime Minister, to study about the social and economical situation of the Muslims in the country and was directed by Justice Rajinder Singh Sachar, clearly states that the socio-economic deficiency of Muslims is caused by their lack of education and representation in governance settings. To the report, “the literacy rate among them is 59.1 %, which is quite below the national average of 65.1%. And only around 4% of the M uslim population has achieved a graduate degree or a diploma, which is less than 7% of the total degree/ diploma-holding population”. Studies and researches on Indian Muslim educational underperformance mainly focused only on the methodological and mechanistic aspects of education. Eventhough, there are many socio cultural and historical factors behind this underachievement researchers have not given been much attention on these factors. Bartholome (1994) in his article, “Beyond the methods fetish: Toward a humanizing pedagogy”, says:

Although it is important to identify useful and promising instructional programs and strategies, it is misleading to assume that blind replication of instructional programs or teacher mastery of particular teaching methods will guarantee successful student learning, especially when we are discussing populations that historically have been mistreated and miseducated by the schools.

Discrimination, oppression and political domination are some of these factors. A according to some authors (Jeffery and Jeffer, 1998; Sikand, 2005) discrimination is the one of the main causes accounting for the educational backwardness of the Muslim students. Basant (2012) says: “the widespread perception of discrimination among Muslims results in a sense of alienation and is therefore seen by the Community as an important cause of inequity”. He further states: “discrimination and ‘communalization’ of reading material and school atmosphere adds to this problem”.

Sachar Committee (2006) documented the pathetic condition of Indian Muslims in all aspects of the life: “The Muslim Community exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development. In fact, by and large, Muslims rank somewhat above Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SCs/STs) but below Hindu-Other Backward Classes (Hindu-OBCs). Other Minorities and Hindu-General (mostly upper castes) in almost all indicators considered.

This committee report was somehow a successful initiative in determining the socio economic and cultural background of the community beyond concentrating on mere sufficient mechanisms and effective methods.

As I mentioned earlier, some authors have mentioned the discrimination as one of the main factors causing the educational underachievement of the Muslim students. According to Jeffery and Jeffery (1998), in government and non-Muslim private schools Muslim students face discrimination mainly from Hindu teachers. Sikand (2005) says: “discrimination from teachers and texts extolling the virtues of Hinduism may result in Muslim parents withdrawing their children from schools”.

Basant (2012) in his study on Indian Muslims; “Education and Employment among Muslims in India: An Analysis of Patterns and Trends” writes: “based on extensive interactions with Muslims, it has been argued that Muslims carry a double burden of being labeled as ‘antinationalist’ and being appeased at the same time”.
As Sachar Committee Report (2006) reflects, there is one another factor which would cause the educational backwardness that parents think that education is not necessary for girls and they withdraw them from schools at an early age to marry them off. This is one of the reasons behind the high dropout rate among Muslim girls. Alam (2007) shows this dropout rate when he says: “Although the Muslim community is represented in primary school in accordance with its percentage share in the total population, its representation in secondary schools is much lower”. Mann (1994) and Sikand (2005) point out that the discrimination in the labor market also effect the educational progress of Muslims. They say: “Since Muslims face considerable discrimination in the labor market, limiting their opportunities in both the public and private sectors, they often do not see the value of educating their children beyond a particular level”.

As a transformative tool critical pedagogy helps to emancipate the marginalized people from domination, oppression, backwardness and subordination. Critical pedagogy’s liberating and emancipating features have to do a lot for the empowerment of Muslim community. Describing this problem-posing character of critical pedagogy, Friere (2000) says:

Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, Posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must Fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and Students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables People to overcome their false perception of reality.

According to Giroux (1992), contemporary studies on the academic progress of specific groups focus merely on the methodological and technical problems. He says: “much of the current debates regarding the improvement of minority student academic achievement occur at a level that treats education as a primarily technical issue”. The socio-cultural and historical backgrounds are always ignored and neglected in these studies. But, beyond the methodological and mechanistic policies only the movement toward a liberating education can emancipate the oppressed people and humanize the society. In this regard critical pedagogy plays a very major role in upbringing of any community. Fischman and McLaren (2005) view that the pedagogy “has produced one of the most dynamic and controversial educational schools of thought of the past 30 years”.

The most powerful character of critical pedagogy is its potential to emancipate the marginalized group of community from subordination, backwardness and oppression. For Critical pedagogues, literacy means learning to critically examine one’s situation in society in terms of socio-economic status, gender, educational background, and race rather than just learning how to read and write (Giroux & McLaren, 1992).

As we mentioned earlier, the basic belief of critical pedagogy is that the education settings are political (Shannon, 1992; Giroux 1997; Shor 1992). For Apple (1990), “schools apply a hidden curriculum whereby students are socialized and behaviorally conditioned to accept hierarchical structures of power”.

This political agenda of schools and other educational institutions contribute to the underdevelopment of the students from marginalized communities. But regrettably, this situation is explained because of the lack of proper methods, teaching strategies, and the technological facilities. And their sociocultural and historical backgrounds are often ignored. Bartholome (1994) explicitly explains that; “the solution to the current underachievement of students from subordinated cultures is often reduced to finding the ‘right’ teaching methods, strategies, or prepackaged curricula that will work with students who do not respond to the so-called ‘regular’ or ‘normal’ instruction”. In his letter to North American educators, Paulo Freire (1985) wrote: “technical expertise and mastery of content area and methodology are insufficient to ensure effective instruction of students from subordinated cultures”.

As Bartolome (1994) views that a deficit view of subordinated students overlaps the current educational system when he writes:

I contend that the most pedagogically advanced strategies are sure to be ineffective in the hands of educators who implicitly or explicitly subscribe to a belief system that renders ethnic, racial, and linguistic minority students at best culturally disadvantaged and in need of fixing (if we could only identify the right recipe), or, at worst, culturally or genetically deficient and beyond fixing.

As Degener (2001) views, teachers play a central role in critical pedagogy because they are ones who obliged to empower the students and most of the time they spend with them. Critical theorists (Freire & Macedo, 1987) have written about the need of political clarity for teachers. It is the “process by which individuals achieve a deepening awareness of the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape their lives and their capacity to recreate them” (Bartolome, 1996). That means, teachers should be aware of what is really happening in the larger society.
Aliakbari and Faraji (2011) make clear the role of students and how should they act to transform their societies through liberating education; “Through problem posing education and questioning the problematic issues in learners’ lives, students learn to think critically and develop a critical consciousness which help them to improve their life conditions and to take necessary actions to build a more just and equitable society”. “Learning through problem solving and practical application leads students to take a more active role in determining their experiences and positions within society” (Dewey 1963).

**CONCLUSION**

Therefore, any discussion having to do with the improvement of subordinated students' academic standing is incomplete if it does not address the discriminatory school practices that lead to dehumanization (Bartolome 1994). Only the implementation of specific methods or particular strategies will not lead their empowerment. So, critical pedagogy, which addresses the issue of discriminatory school practices and power domination in educational sector, can make differences and transform the disadvantaged students. It can emancipate them from all kinds of oppression and discrimination.

For many socio-political reasons Indian Muslims are lagging far behind in the educational sector. They are suffering from Discrimination, oppression and political domination. But, these factors are being neglected and debates on methods and strategies are getting hot. Here, approach to this academic backwardness from a critical pedagogical view point opens many doors for researchers and educators to view this issue from a different perspective and find out sustainable solutions.

**REFERENCES**


