

**Change in the Levels of Educational Backwardness of Muslim Women in  
India : Evidence from NFHS – I to NFHS-IV (1992-93 to 2015-16)**

**By**

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**Abstract**

The main objective of our study is to find the trends in the levels of education among Muslim women between NFHS-I and NFHS-IV, i.e. from 1992-93 to 2015-16. Further we would like to compare and contrast the trends among Muslim women with those among women from different religious groups.

During the period from 1992-93 to 2015-16, the sharpest increase in the percentage of women who have completed high school is found amongst Buddhist women followed by Sikh, Christian, Hindu and Muslim women.

It's heartening to know that during the period from 1992-93 to 2015-16 i.e. between NFHS –I and NFHS-IV, the percentage of women who have studied above high school has sharply increased among all the communities. The sharpest increase is found amongst the women of Jain community. This is followed by Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim women.

In 1992-93, both Buddhist and Muslim women were at the lowest rung of the ladder. In 2015-16, Buddhist women have gone much ahead of Muslim women. In 2015-16, the percentage of women who have studied above high school is the lowest among the Muslim women. This is unfortunate.

Thus in general Muslim women lag behind women from all other religious groups. It is quite disturbing.

We have tried to pin point reasons for the educational backwardness of Muslim women. We have also made some recommendations which will have policy implications.

To conclude, in order to make Muslim community a dynamic community which can face the challenges of a modern society, Muslim women have to become literate and their educational levels have to be improved substantially. To achieve this, it requires vision and hard work on the part of the Muslim community and its leadership. Affirmative action in education is the best way to enable them to catch up with women from other religions in a reasonable period of time. This requires a clear vision, a lot of planning, hard work and missionary zeal on the part of the Muslim community and its leadership.

# **Change in the Levels of Educational Backwardness of Muslim Women in India : Evidence from NFHS – I to NFHS-IV (1992-93 to 2015-16)**

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## **Introduction**

It is generally believed that educational levels among the Muslim women in India are low and these low levels prevent them from attaining the benefits of a modern society. However, if any program to raise the educational levels among Muslim women are to be undertaken, first it is essential to have data on their level of education. In Indian censuses, information is collected on education of each individual member of the household by religion. Also, tables on levels of education among men and women are prepared. But due to reasons best known to census authorities, this information by religion was not being published in the past. The main aim of this research is to provide authentic data on levels and trends of education among Muslim women in India.

## **Objective of the study**

The main objective of our study is to find the trends in the levels of education among Muslim women between NFHS-I and NFHS-IV, i.e. from 1992-93 to 2015-16. Further we would like to compare and contrast the trends among Muslim women with those among women from different religious groups.

## **Evidence from NFHS-I, II, III and IV**

The National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) are nationwide surveys conducted with a representative sample of households throughout the country. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), Government of India (GoI), initiated the NFHS surveys to provide high quality data on population and health indicators. The three NFHS surveys conducted and the fourth one conducted recently, have been a major landmark in the development of a demographic and health data base for India. An important objective of the NFHS surveys has been to provide national and

state estimates of fertility, family planning, infant mortality, reproductive and child health, nutrition of women and children, the quality of health and family welfare services, and **socio-economic conditions**. The NFHS surveys used standardized questionnaires, sample designs, and field procedures to collect the data. The information provided by the NFHS surveys assists policy makers and programme administrators in planning and implementing population, health, and nutrition programs. The MOHFW designated the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai, as the nodal agency for each of the four rounds of NFHS.

### **NFHS-I**

The country's first National Family Health Survey (NFHS-I) was conducted in 1992-93. Interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of 88,562 households and 89,777 ever married women age 13-49 years in 24 states and the national capital territory of Delhi. The East-West Centre, Hawaii, USA, and Macro International, Maryland, USA, provided technical assistance for NFHS-I.

### **NFHS-II**

The second National Family Health Survey (NFHS-II) was conducted in 1998-99. In addition to the population and health components covered in NFHS-I, NFHS-II collected information on the quality of health and family welfare services, reproductive health problems, the status of women, and domestic violence.

NFHS-II covered a representative sample of 91,000 ever married women age 15-49 years across all 26 states of India. NFHS-II also provided estimates at the regional level for five states and three metro cities as well as slum areas in Mumbai.. Technical assistance was provided by the Macro International, Maryland, USA and the East-West Centre, Hawaii, USA.

### **NFHS-III**

The third National Family Health Survey was conducted in 2005-06. In addition to the indicators covered in NFHS-II, NFHS-III provided information on several new and emerging issues, for example HIV and AIDS. Interviews were conducted with 124,385 women age 15-49 and 74,369

men age 15-54 from all 29 states. Fieldwork for NFHS-III was conducted in two phases from November 2005 to August 2006.

### **Data by Religion**

In each survey, data were collected by religion. To illustrate, in the NFHS-III, in the national sample, based on the religion of the household head, 82 per cent were Hindus, 13 percent were Muslims, 3 per cent were Christians, 2 per cent were Sikhs, and 1 per cent were Buddhists/Neo-Buddhists. All other religions together accounted for less than 1 per cent of the household.

### **Data on education by Religion**

The NFHS-III report noted that in general 55 per cent of women age 15-49 are literate compared with 78 per cent of men in the same age group. Further even among those tested, namely those with no education and who had completed less than six years of education, the gender differential in the ability to read at all was evident: 81 per cent of women tested could not read at all, compared with 63 per cent of men.

Further, it found that Muslim women and men followed by Hindu women and men, were less likely to be literate than women and men of most other religions, although the differentials by religion are much greater for women than for men.

### **NFHS-IV (2015-16)**

The National Family Health Survey 2015-16 (NFHS-IV), the fourth in the NFHS series, provides information on population, health and nutrition for India and each State / Union territory. NFHS-IV, for the first time, provides district-level estimates for many important indicators.

As in the earlier rounds, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India designated International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai as the nodal agency to conduct NFHS-IV. The main objective of each successive round of the NFHS has been to provide essential data on health and family welfare and emerging issues in this area. NFHS-IV data will be useful in setting benchmarks and examining the progress in health sector the country has made over time. Besides providing evidence for the effectiveness of the ongoing programmes, the data from NFHS-IV help in identifying need for new programmes with area specific focus. Four Survey Schedules -

Household, Woman's, Man's and Biomarker - were canvassed in local language using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). In the Household Schedule, information was collected on all usual members of the household and visitors who stayed in the household the previous night as well as *socio-economic* characteristics of the household, water and sanitation, health insurance, number of deaths in the household in the three years preceding the survey etc. Information on the woman's characteristics, marriage, fertility, children's immunizations and childcare, nutrition, contraception, etc. was collected. Along with that, data on woman's level of education and exposure to media by religion were also collected. Questions on age, marital status, education, literacy, employment status, occupation, media exposure, religion, and caste/tribe, and duration of residence are included in order to provide information on characteristics likely to influence women's socio-economic and demographic behavior.

NFHS-IV fieldwork for India was conducted from 20<sup>th</sup> January 2015 to 4<sup>th</sup> December 2016 by 14 Field Agencies and gathered information from 601,509 households, 699,686 women, and 103,525 men. Fact Sheets for each State/UT and District of India have been prepared separately.

For NFHS-IV, the sample consisted of approximately 28,000 clusters (small geographically defined areas) throughout the country. The households in each of these clusters were recently listed or enumerated. A sample of households was then scientifically selected to be included in NFHS-4 survey from the list in each of the clusters. Each of these households were visited and information obtained about the households using the Household Questionnaire. Women and men within these households were interviewed using an Individual Questionnaire. Women age 15-49 years were interviewed using the individual Woman's Questionnaire. Men age 15-54 years in about 15% of households were interviewed using the individual Man's Questionnaire.

In NFHS-IV it is assumed that it takes 10 years to complete high school and 12 years to complete higher secondary. Thus, for those who are educated beyond the higher secondary level, the additional number of years of education they have had to the number 12 were added. Since there is a great variation throughout the country in the number of years it takes to complete different higher education degrees, illustrative guidelines were provided on the number of years that should be entered for some of the more common degrees. The guiding principle that was used was to enter the minimum number of years needed to complete the degree. Also, if a person had done the same

degree twice (two M.A.s for example), then one MA only was counted. Using this standardized procedure, it was expected to avoid extensive probing. Bachelor's degree 15 years (12+3) Master's degree 17 years (12+3+2) Engineering 16 years (12+4) MBBS 17 years (12+5) Polytechnic 13 years (10+3) ITI 11 years (10+1) Ph.D. 20 years (12+3+2+3). In such great detail, the data on education were collected meticulously. . We observe that in the NFHS IV, as in the past, data have been meticulously collected on education .

Thus, if we include the data from NFHS- IV, we would be able to compare the data on education by religion at four points of time. This would be really a very rich comparison and is expected to provide quite interesting and useful insights on the women's education in Muslim community.

### **Trends in levels of education**

A careful observation of the published tables on women respondents' education levels in the four surveys of NFHS reveal that the educational categories are strictly not comparable. They are comparable in the NFHS I and II. Similarly, those in NFHS III and IV are comparable. To know the trends, we need to have comparable categories. Therefore the education categories have been converted into five comparable categories viz. Illiterate, Primary school complete, Middle school complete, High school complete and Above high school. These data are presented in the form of tables, bar diagrams and graphs in the following sections.

## **I**

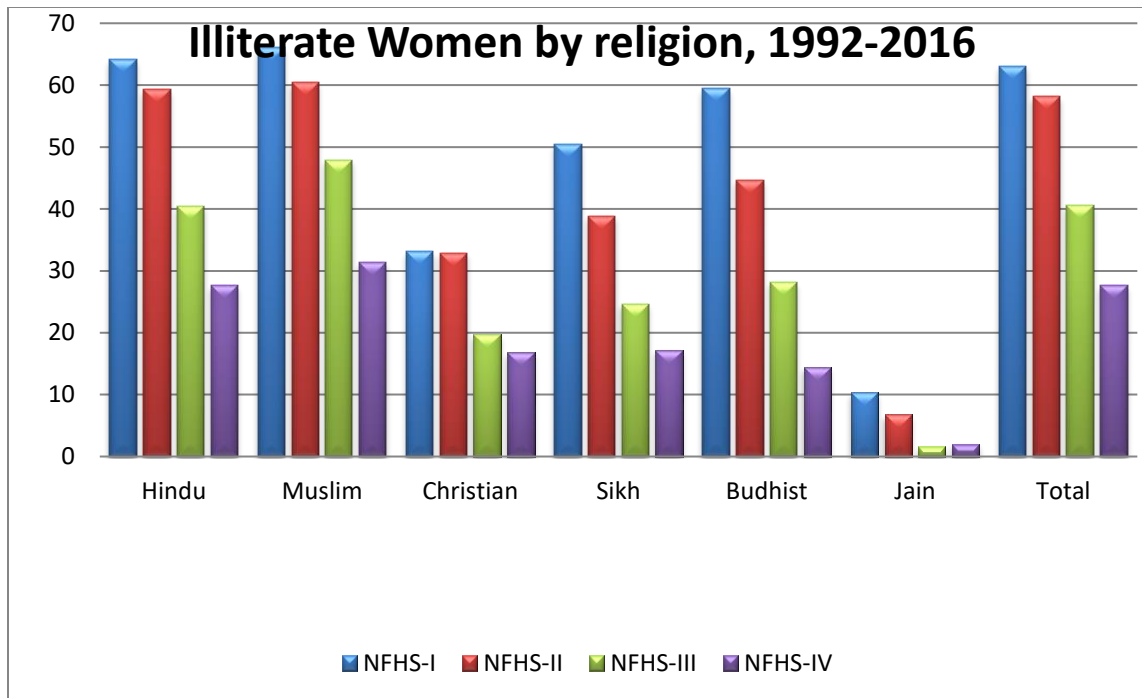
Our findings with respect to trends in different level of education for Muslim women and women from different religious groups are as follows:

### **Illiterate women:**

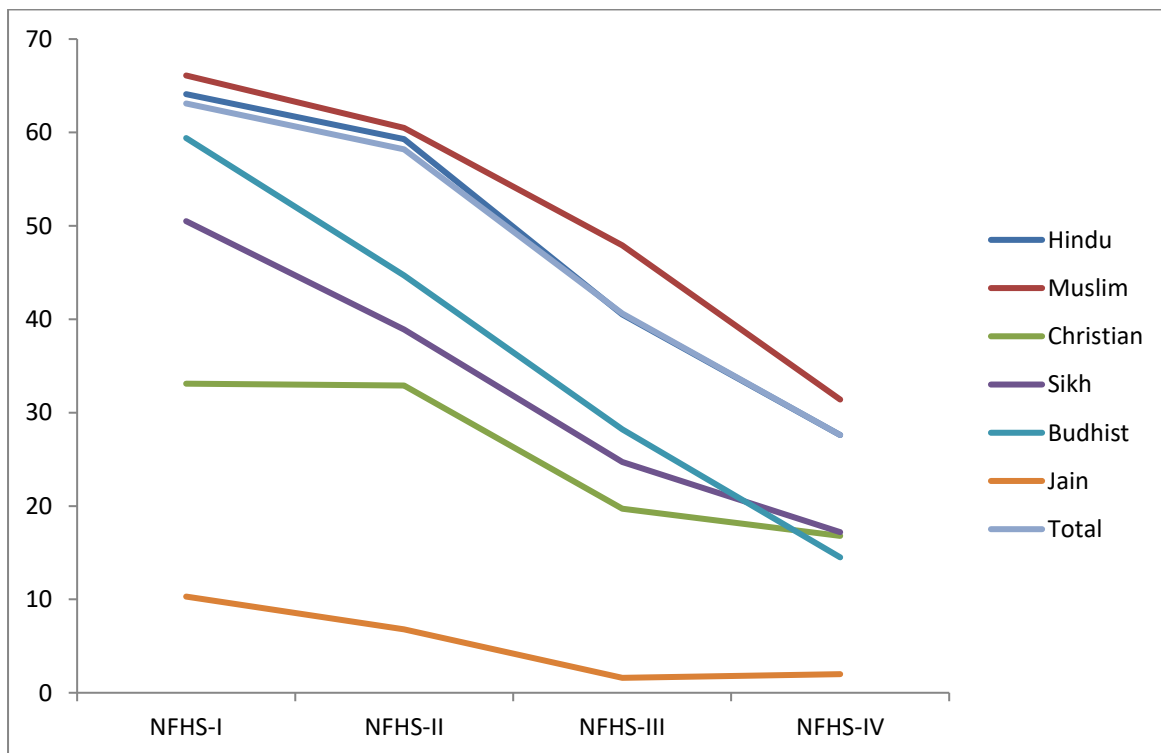
There has been a sharp decline in the percentage of illiterate women in all communities. A drastic decline is found among Muslim and Hindu women followed by Buddhist and Sikh women. The decline is lower among the Christian women and the least among the Jain women. This is because among Christians, higher percentage of women would be found among higher categories of education. Among Jain women, there were very few illiterates in 1992-93 itself.

| <b>Table 1: Illiterate Women by religion, 1992-2016 (%)</b> |               |                |                 |                |
|---|---------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <b>Religion</b>   | <b>NFHS-I</b> | <b>NFHS-II</b> | <b>NFHS-III</b> | <b>NFHS-IV</b> |
| Hindu   | 64.1          | 59.3           | 40.5            | 27.6           |
| Muslim  | 66.1          | 60.5           | 47.9            | 31.4           |
| Christian   | 33.1          | 32.9           | 19.7            | 16.8           |
| Sikh  | 50.5          | 38.9           | 24.7            | 17.2           |
| Budhist   | 59.4          | 44.7           | 28.2            | 14.5           |
| Jain  | 10.3          | 6.8            | 1.6             | 2.0            |
| Total   | 63.1          | 58.2           | 40.6            | 27.6           |





**Figure 1 Illiterate Women by religion, 1992-2016**

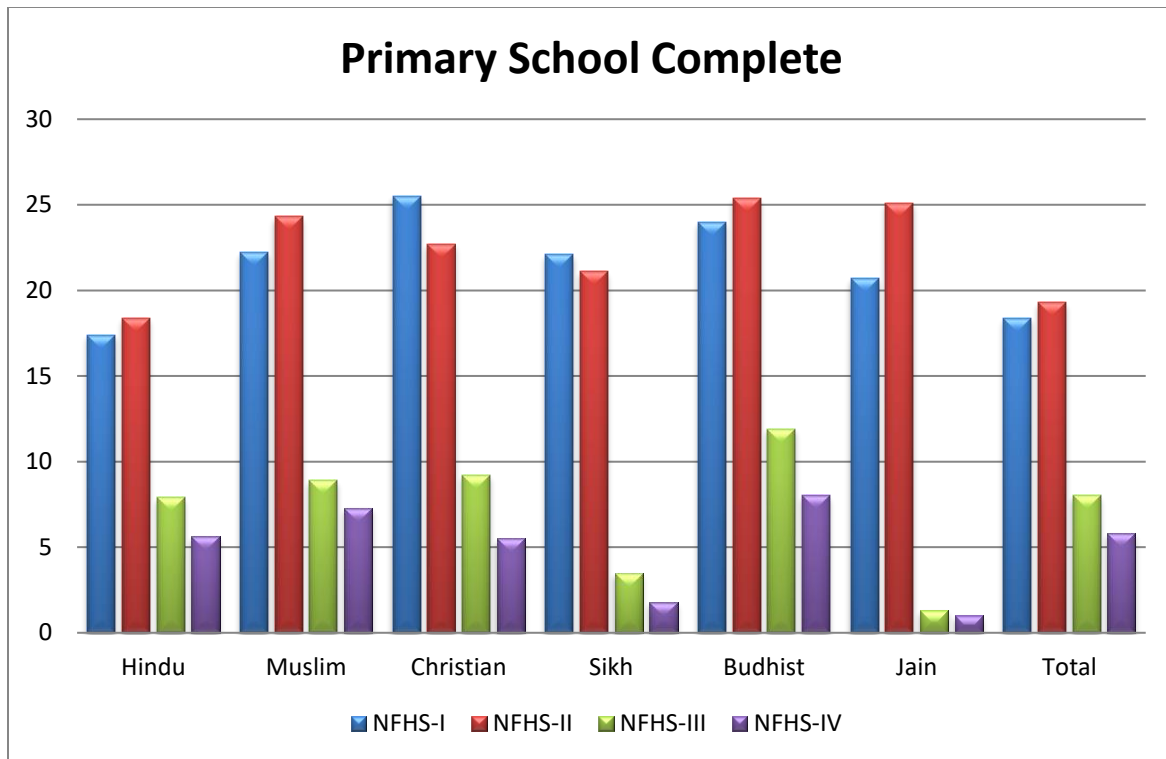


**Figure 2 Illiterate Women by religion, 1992-2016**

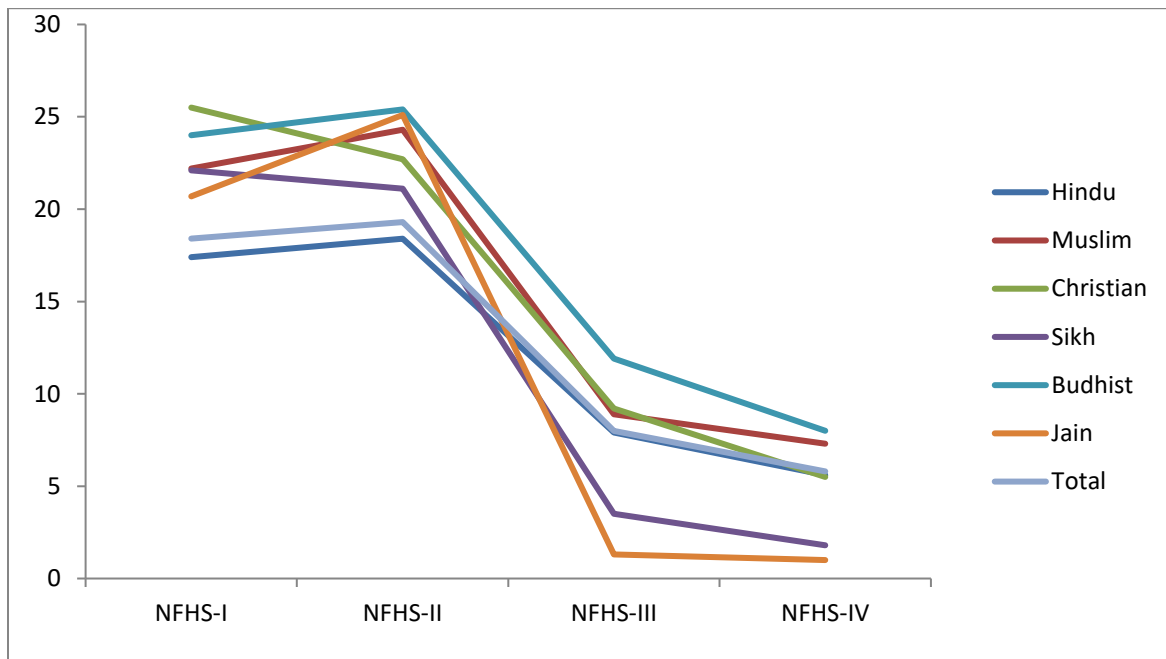
### Primary School complete:

We find that initially between 1992-93 and 1998-99, the percentage of women in the primary school complete, increased among the women of all religious groups except amongst Christian and Sikh women. Later it declined drastically between 2005-06 and 2015-16 because higher percentage of these women moved into the higher levels of education. The same trend is found amongst Muslim women too.

| <b>Religion</b> | <b>NFHS-I</b> | <b>NFHS-II</b> | <b>NFHS-III</b> | <b>NFHS-IV</b> |
|-----------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Hindu           | 17.4          | 18.4           | 7.9             | 5.6            |
| Muslim          | 22.2          | 24.3           | 8.9             | 7.3            |
| Christian       | 25.5          | 22.7           | 9.2             | 5.5            |
| Sikh            | 22.1          | 21.1           | 3.5             | 1.8            |
| Budhist         | 24            | 25.4           | 11.9            | 8.0            |
| Jain            | 20.7          | 25.1           | 1.3             | 1.0            |
| Total           | 18.4          | 19.3           | 8.0             | 5.8            |



**Figure 3 Women who completed Primary School by religion, 1992-2016**

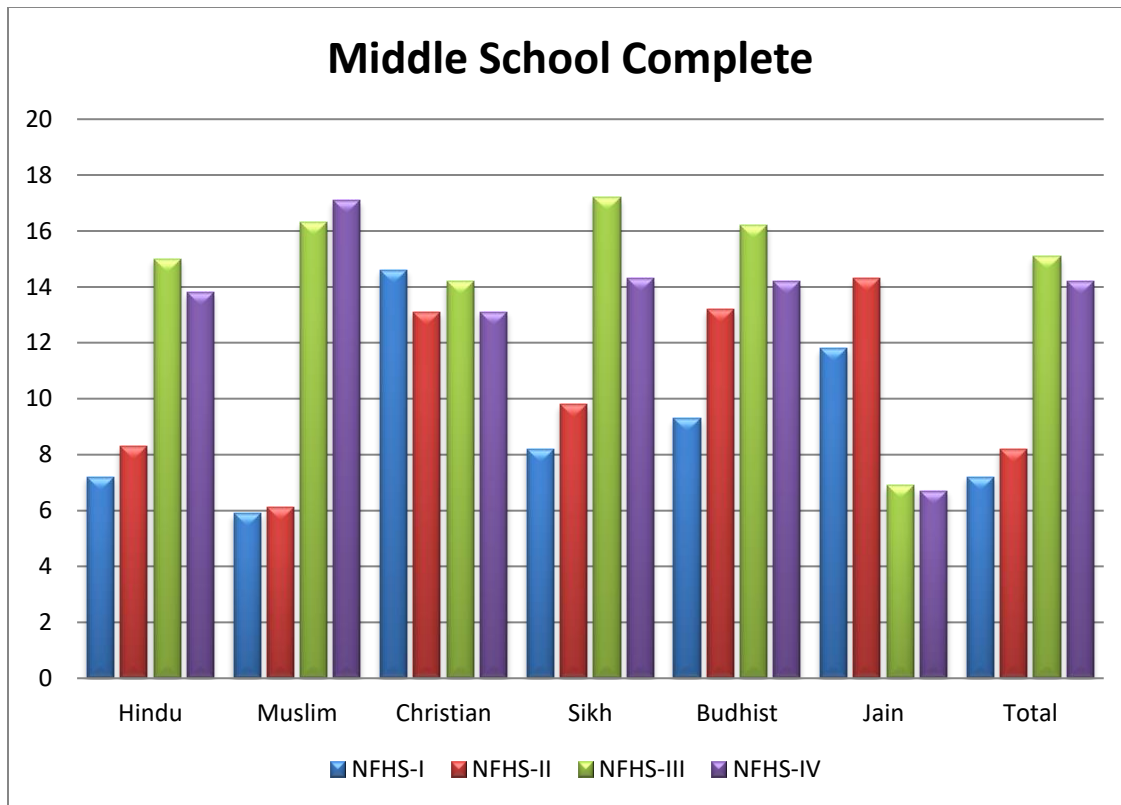


**Figure 4 Women who completed Primary School by religion, 1992-2016**

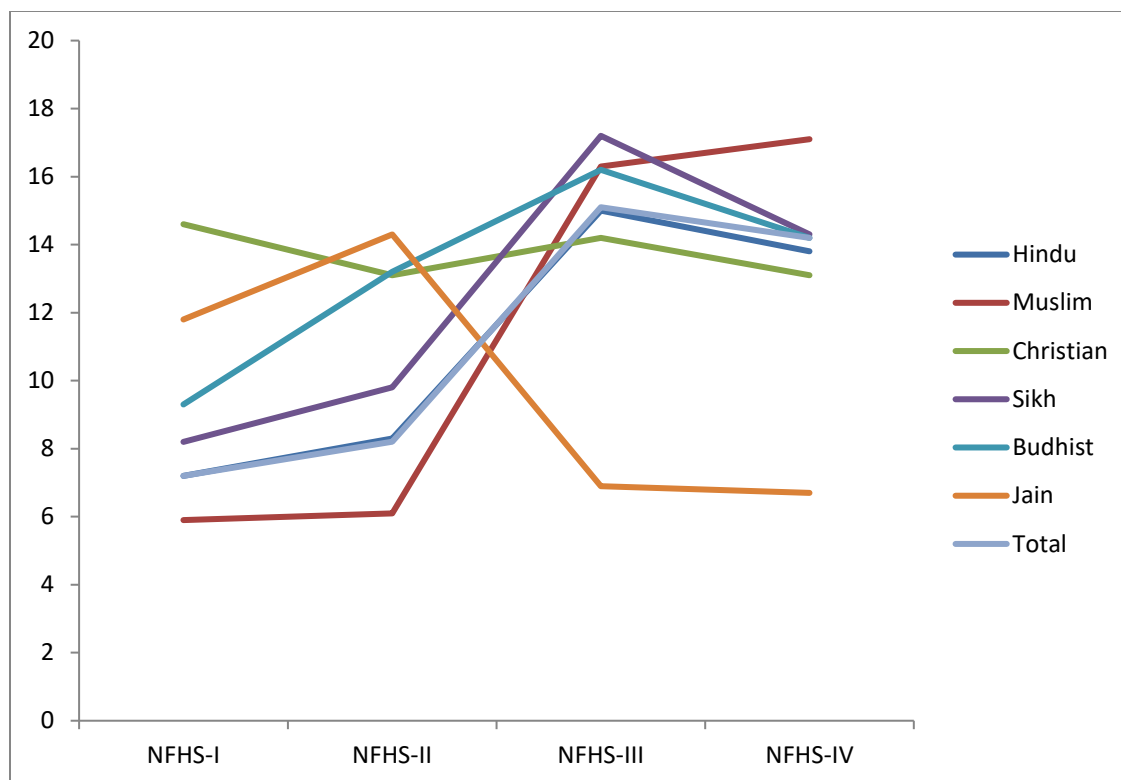
### **Middle School Complete:**

Between 1992-93 and 2015-16, we find that there has been a sharp increase in the percentage of women who have completed the middle school. The sharpest increase is found among the Muslim women. This is heartening. Between 2005-06 and 2015-16, the percentage has declined for women of all other communities except Muslims. This decline is sharpest for Jain women for the period between 1998-99 and 2005-06. This can be explained by the fact that more women of this community have progressed to higher levels of education.

| <b>Table 3 : Women who completed Middle School by religion, 1992-2016(%)</b> |        |         |          |         |
|--|--------|---------|----------|---------|
| Religion   | NFHS-I | NFHS-II | NFHS-III | NFHS-IV |
| Hindu  | 7.2    | 8.3     | 15       | 13.8    |
| Muslim   | 5.9    | 6.1     | 16.3     | 17.1    |
| Christian  | 14.6   | 13.1    | 14.2     | 13.1    |
| Sikh   | 8.2    | 9.8     | 17.2     | 14.3    |
| Buddhist   | 9.3    | 13.2    | 16.2     | 14.2    |
| Jain   | 11.8   | 14.3    | 6.9      | 6.7     |
| Total  | 7.2    | 8.2     | 15.1     | 14.2    |



**Figure 5 Women who completed Middle School by religion, 1992-2016**



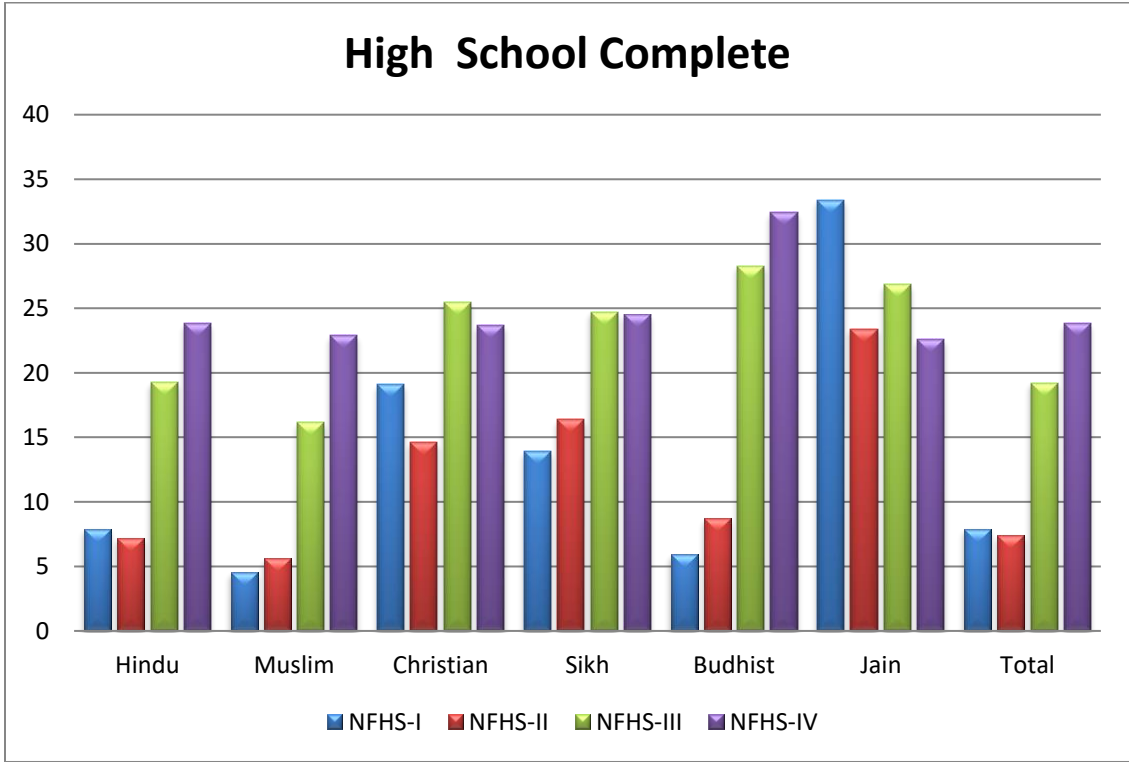
**Figure 6 Women who completed Middle School by religion, 1992-2016**

**High school complete:**

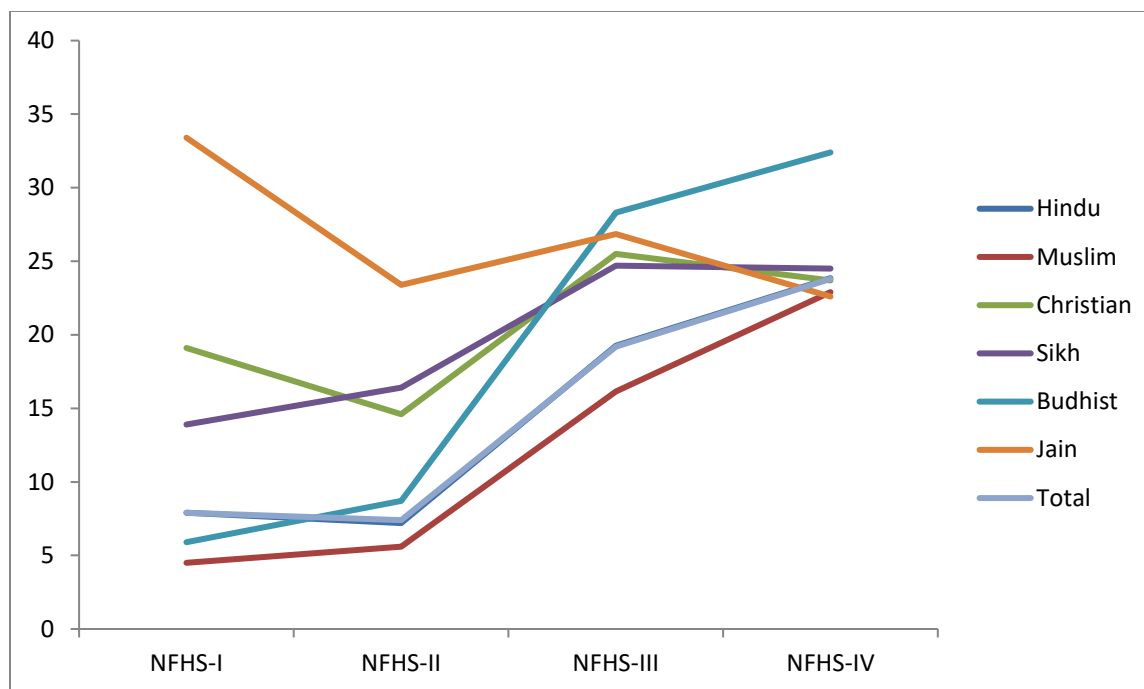
During the period from 1992-93 to 2015-16, the sharpest increase in the percentage of women who have completed high school is found amongst Buddhist women followed by Sikh, Christian, Hindu and Muslim women. Between 2005-06 and 2015-16, decline in the percentage is observed for Christian and Jain women. This is because higher percentage of women from these two groups have moved to higher levels of education.

| <b>Table 4 : Women who completed High School by religion, 1992-2016 (%)</b> |               |                |                 |                |
|---|---------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <b>Religion</b>   | <b>NFHS-I</b> | <b>NFHS-II</b> | <b>NFHS-III</b> | <b>NFHS-IV</b> |
| Hindu   | 7.9           | 7.2            | 19.3            | 23.9           |

|           |      |      |      |      |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|
| Muslim    | 4.5  | 5.6  | 16.2 | 22.9 |
| Christian | 19.1 | 14.6 | 25.5 | 23.7 |
| Sikh      | 13.9 | 16.4 | 24.7 | 24.5 |
| Buddhist  | 5.9  | 8.7  | 28.3 | 32.4 |
| Jain      | 33.4 | 23.4 | 26.9 | 22.6 |
| Total     | 7.9  | 7.4  | 19.2 | 23.8 |



**Figure 7 : Women who completed High School by religion, 1992-2016**



**Figure 8: Women who completed High School by religion, 1992-2016**

**Above High School complete:**

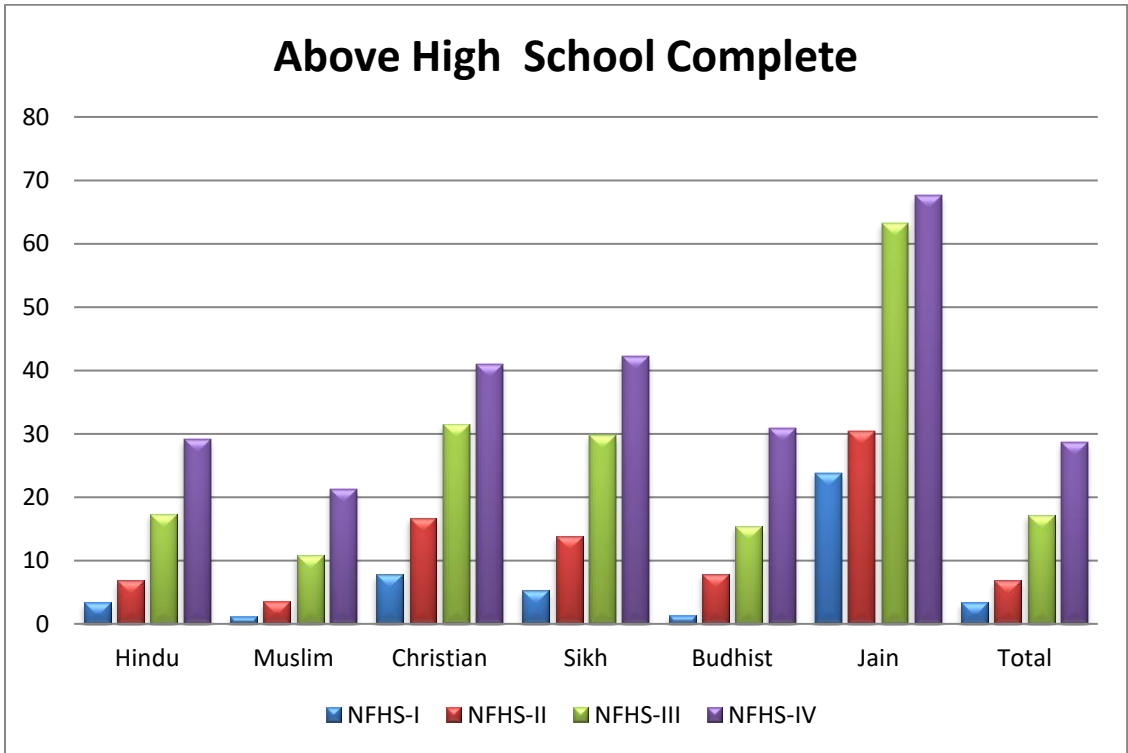
It’s heartening to know that during the period from 1992-93 to 2015-16 i.e. between NFHS –I and NFHS-IV, the percentage of women who have studied above high school has sharply increased among all the communities. The sharpest increase is found amongst the women of Jain community. This is followed by Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim women.

In 1992-93, both Buddhist and Muslim women were at the lowest rung of the ladder. In 2015-16, Buddhist women have gone much ahead of Muslim women. In 2015-16, the percentage of women who have studied above high school is the lowest among the Muslim women. This is unfortunate.

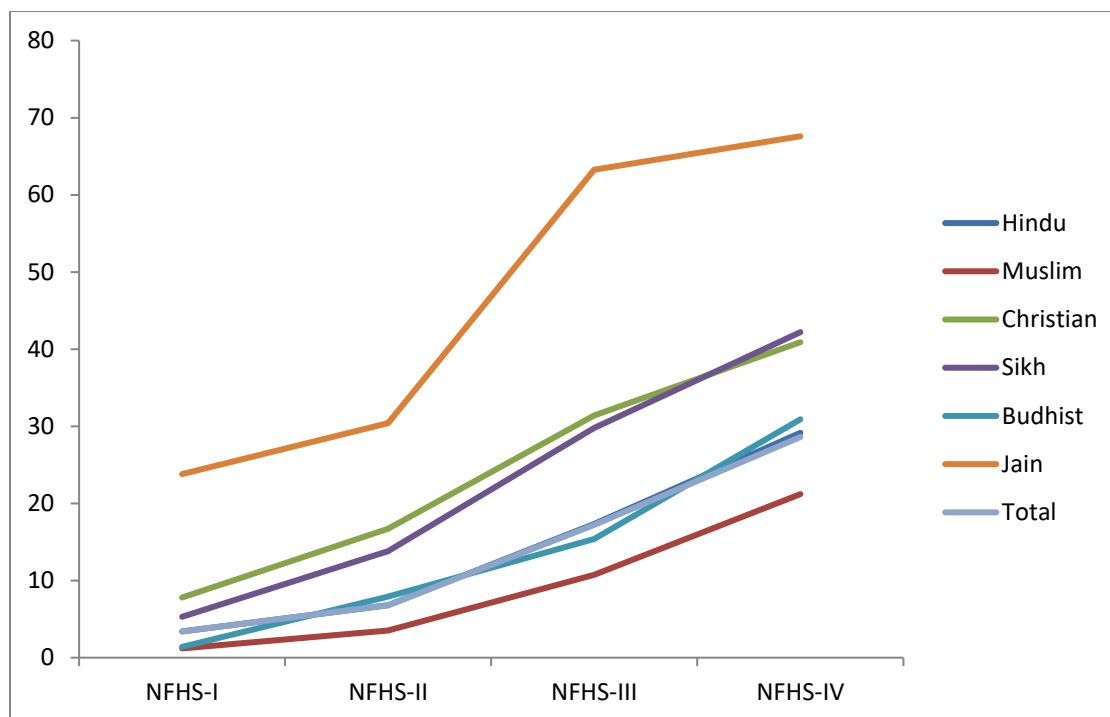
**Table 5 Women with Above High School education by religion 1992 to 2016 (%)**



| Religion  | NFHS-I | NFHS-II | NFHS-III | NFHS-IV |
|-----------|--------|---------|----------|---------|
| Hindu     | 3.4    | 6.8     | 17.4     | 29.2    |
| Muslim    | 1.2    | 3.5     | 10.8     | 21.2    |
| Christian | 7.8    | 16.7    | 31.4     | 40.9    |
| Sikh      | 5.3    | 13.8    | 29.8     | 42.2    |
| Buddhist  | 1.4    | 7.9     | 15.4     | 30.9    |
| Jain      | 23.8   | 30.4    | 63.25    | 67.6    |
| Total     | 3.4    | 6.8     | 17.2     | 28.6    |



**Figure 9 Women with Above High School education by religion 1992 to 2016**



**Figure 10 Women with Above High School education by religion 1992 to 2016**

## II

Khair (2017) elaborates on reasons for lower levels of education amongst Muslim girls as follows:

1. The main reason why a large chunk of Muslim women are not literate is lack of schools and colleges in the areas where there is higher concentration of the Muslim population. Girls are enrolled in nearby schools and are not sent far off to study due to safety reasons.
2. The traditional patriarchal interpretation of “Qiwama”, hinders Muslim women’s education (men are guardians of Muslim women). The Holy Quran stipulates that both men and women are protectors of each another. However “Qiwama” is used to justify many restrictions on women. For example, limiting women’s right to free movement is a great impediment to free and equal access to unhindered education.
3. In some regions Muslim girls are forced to marry at early age and kept at home instead of classroom. They are taught that their only role is that of a wife and of a mother and are discouraged from seeking educational and professional opportunities.

4. In Muslim areas, there is no infrastructure or poor infrastructure. For example, in the walled city of Delhi, in Urdu medium schools the buildings are in a dilapidated condition and without basic facilities like drinking water. Students sit on mats, whether it's summer or winter, toilets are in bad condition or not available. The behavior of teachers towards their students is bad and not encouraging.
5. The girl child is abused by the female teacher, who forces her to perform their personal chores. They come to school, take attendance and go home to do their household work. This is exploitation in the name of education.
6. More emphasis is laid on Quranic education which is given at home to the girls and they are discouraged to go outside the home to study at school.
7. Muslim parents feel that education is not important for girls and it may give them wrong values. Even if girls are enrolled, they are withdrawn at an early age.
8. The implementation of programme of MSDP during 2007-2012 has not been a priority in the minority concentrated districts.

### **III**

In order to bring Muslims and Muslim women on par with other communities, undoubtedly their educational status has to be improved. We would like to make the following recommendations for the educational upliftment of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular

1. Muslim women in Haryana need literacy programme urgently as here universal illiteracy is observed. Also, the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan need literacy programme at the earliest. Excepting the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, in all the states, sincere efforts are needed to improve literacy levels among Muslim women. More concerted efforts are required in urban areas than in rural areas as proportionately more Muslims live in urban areas than in rural areas.

2. Among many reasons for the low levels of literacy among Muslim women, lower socio-economic status of Muslims could be one of the reasons . If so, sincere efforts are required to improve socio-economic status of Muslims.
3. The educational levels among Muslim women with regard to the categories of high school complete and above high school are very low. To improve this, dropout rates among Muslim girls at lower levels of education need to be reduced substantially. When compared with Hindu women, the educational backwardness among Muslim women becomes more intense. In order to make Muslim women competitive in Indian society, they need to be given higher education by making concerted and long-term efforts. For this, special incentive should be provided and change in the attitudes of Muslim parents in general and Muslim men in particular needs to be brought about.
4. Assuming that Muslim women would watch/ listen to educational programmes on TV and radio, these media can be used to promote informal education among Muslim women. The observation that in Haryana, where Muslim women are universally illiterate, about **18** per cent of the women watch TV and **16** per cent listen to radio supports the above recommendation..
5. Communalism against Muslims has to be fought against as it leads to ghettoization due to insecurity among the Muslims. Ghettoization leads to isolation of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular from the society which is detrimental to Muslim women's going to school and college and other types of empowerment.
6. We need to educate Muslim men and women in general and impart social work education in particular.
7. We need to increase their exposure to media.
8. Some activism needs to be imparted to Muslim men and women. Then only they would realize that good literacy, education and exposure to media are their rights which would empower them to lead dignified lives.
9. Community leaders need to be involved in the development of Muslim community in general and the Muslim women in particular.

10. There is need for the government and the political parties to treat Muslims and Muslim women as equal citizens and not as vote-banks.
11. There is an urgent need for Muslims to organize themselves along with other communities and pressurize the government to implement all the Sachhar Committee (2006) recommendations.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, in order to make Muslim community a dynamic community which can face the challenges of a modern society, Muslim women have to become literate and their educational levels have to be improved substantially. To achieve this, it requires vision and hard work on the part of the Muslim community and its leadership. Affirmative action in education is the best way to enable them to catch up with women from other religions in a reasonable period of time. This requires a clear vision, a lot of planning, hard work and missionary zeal on the part of the Muslim community and its leadership.

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