

# Situatedness of School Choice among Muslim Students: An Intersectional Approach

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## Abstract

So far research on school choice sets (decision about choosing a school from an available set of schools) has primarily regarded parents as key actors. Moving beyond, this article emphasises that children are important actors as they inform parental decisions to co-produce certain choice sets. This article foregrounds how school-going Muslim children's experiences interact with their families to produce school choices across public and private schools in Bangalore, India, while accounting for their marginalisation at the intersections of religion, class and gender. Data were collected from 4 school sites using 21 focus group discussions with 190 children and in-depth interviews with 56 children, 14 teachers and 3 parents and analysed using an intersectional framework. Our findings suggest that factors like heterogeneities in social class, differential levels of religious discrimination/exclusion in schools and a need to protect their faith through education and the complex overlap between these were crucial in shaping choices.

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## Introduction

School choice has been most often discussed in relation to providing greater educational opportunities to all, especially socially marginalised groups globally (Ball et al., 2013; Berends, 2015) and in India (Mehendale et al., 2015). The first of such attempts was made through market-based models. Advocates of market-based models (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1955) claim that it would cause de-bureaucratisation and thereby encourage marginalised groups (low-income and other minorities) to participate more freely by expressing their demands (Berends & Zottola, 2009; Lareau & Goyette, 2014). However, in a developing country like India, the responsibility for providing educational opportunities to all strata of the society has been with the welfare state (elaborated in the next section). Nevertheless, these approaches focus on increasing educational opportunities to allow greater participation. Though market-based approaches have increased the number of choices, they have concomitantly been shown to perpetuate and reinforce exclusion or inequality instead of mitigating it (Reay, 2004; Serbulo, 2019; Wright et al., 2003). They have been critiqued for their implicit assumption that school choice markets are fair and free of bias (Bell, 2009a) and for an oversimplification about considering all parents as a uniform category of 'rational consumers' (Buckley & Schneider, 2003). Social theorists instead argue that choice sets are situated in a subjective space within a stratified social context (Bell, 2009a). For marginalised groups, factors like racial composition (Bell, 2007, 2008; Bunar, 2010; Goyette, 2008), socio-economic status (DeJarnatt, 2008; Hastings, 2009) and social capital—information that flows through class-bound social networks (Bell, 2009a; Holme, 2002) are important factors in making choices. Bell (2009a, 2009b) emphasises on the socio-historical nature of choice. She found that parental choice sets are restrained by existing social inequalities within which educational opportunities are unevenly distributed. In a similar vein, low-income, racial minority parents not only identified financial constraints as an important factor (Ndimande, 2016) but also faced barriers when they attempted to enrol their children into schools (Cooper, 2007). There has also been an interest in examining the school's structures and internal processes (Dreeben, 1994; Gamoran et al., 2000; Schneider, 2003). In other words, 'what goes on inside the black box of schools and how school and schooling factors contribute to both social inequality and productivity' (Berends & Zottola, 2009, p. 45) helps in gaining insights about student experiences, student-teacher

relationships, which in turn shapes choices sets. This article aims to further this aspect of understanding students' experiences which are in conversation with parents, thus shaping school choices.

Research on school choice in India has been centred around parental choices of public versus private. Studies have shown that, despite RTE's<sup>1</sup> non-discriminatory clauses, its implementation has been restricted by structural/procedural and hidden barriers (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). Most studies have focused on economic disadvantages as central to understanding school choices (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2017; Srivastava, 2007; Tooley & Dixon, 2007), and few have widened this lens to show that inequalities of class, caste and gender are deeply entrenched and, thus, reflected in school choices (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). In fact, an expanded school market has been shown to further reproduce and fortify social disadvantages of class, caste and gender (Hill et al., 2011; Juneja, 2021; Ramachandran, 2004). However, these studies have examined disadvantaged caste groups like SC and ST, their low-income and gendered concerns (Duraisamy, 2004; Velaskar, 2005) but religion has not received attention except for an understanding that Muslims have the lowest enrolment share or are most disadvantaged (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2006). Overall, an increase in educational opportunities has not necessarily translated into empowered choices. Thus, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that school choice is far more complex than the private–public dichotomy (Jain, 2018; James & Woodhead, 2014; Sarangapani & Winch, 2010) in a heavily stratified society like India. For a careful analysis, the use of an intersectional lens would be necessary to understand the choice-making process (Goswami, 2015; Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Most importantly, 'intersectional perspectives recognise the heterogeneity of different social groups and examine how particular individuals and groups are both systematically marginalised in different spaces, places and times but also use their positions at the intersections of certain categories as resources for activism and resistance' (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017, p. 1). In this article, we attempt to understand choices across a range of schools from public to private, while retaining an intersectional focus which includes the minimally explored category of religion.

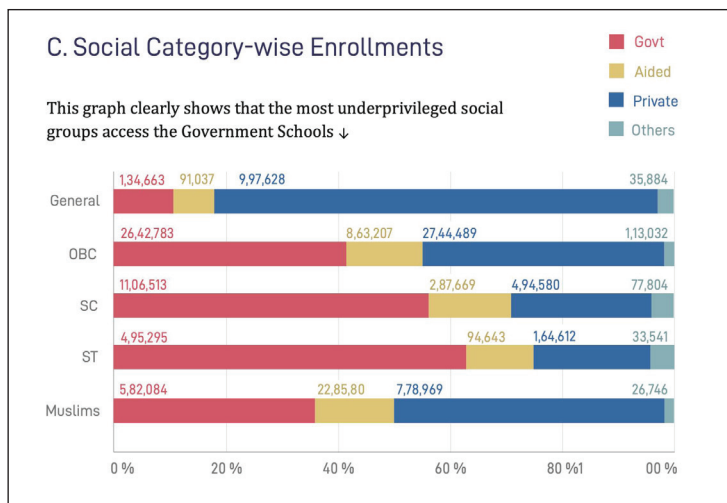
Second, most research has considered only parents as key actors in making school choices. Children have not been considered important though they directly experience the school. Also, the developments in childhood studies that consider children as agentive beings (Prout & James, 1997) have reflected minimally in the research on school choice.

However, there is some evidence that working-class parents tend to rely more on their children for making such decisions (David et al., 1994; Reay & Ball, 1998), whereas middle-class parents tend to provide more guidance to their children (Reay & Lucey, 2000). These interactions within families and their entanglement with other social structures make children as important as parents in the choice-making process (Reay & Lucey, 2000). This article foregrounds how school-going Muslim children's experiences interact with their families to produce school choices while accounting for their marginalisation at the intersections of religion, class and gender.

## Context and Methods

This study draws from ethnographic fieldwork across four schools in urban Bangalore between March 2019 and March 2020. Despite its rapid urbanisation (Puttalingaiah et al., 2020), there are sharp economic inequalities between the 'local' and 'corporate' resulting in a divided city (Benjamin, 2000), which in turn marginalises the working classes. Similar divisions can be seen in the education system wherein the city caters to elite, diasporic populations through international schools while the most marginalised attend low-fee private or fee-free government schools (Tukdeo & Mali, 2021). Apart from economic inequalities, there are several groups that become marginalised by virtue of their non-native status, linguistic or religious minority status or overlapping of these factors (Engineer, 1994; Nair, 1996).

One such example is the Muslim community, which forms a marginalised religious minority comprising 13.9% of Bangalore's total population. A report indicated that Muslims had the largest share of households living below the poverty line and the lowest share in income (per annum) above 10,000 ₹ (Khan, 1995). Specific district-wise literacy rates for Muslims are not available since the 2011 census data clubs Muslims under Other Backward Categories (OBC). The 2001 census showed that the literacy rate of Muslims in Bangalore was 79.3%, which was the lowest among all religious groups in the city but higher than the Muslim national average of 59.1%. However, the percentage of those who were educated till Class 7 was 43.2% and the percentage of those educated above Class 7 was only 12.8% (Khan, 1995). Interestingly, their recent school enrolment pattern in 2018–19 has also been different from other marginalised groups.



**Source:** School Education in Karnataka (2018–19), a report by Department of Primary and Secondary Education, Government of Karnataka

While a vast majority of students from all other marginalised groups are enrolled in government or government-aided schools, only 50% (approximately) Muslim students have opted for the same, while the remaining half are enrolled in private, fee-paying schools (see figure above, Government of Karnataka, 2018).<sup>2</sup> This is an atypical pattern of school choice considering their economic and employment conditions. Another important consideration, unique to this group, is that their marginalisation is not simply due to the numeric minority status. Rather, being labelled ‘anti-national’ has dissociated their religious identity from their national identity leading to serious forms of discrimination and violence (Engineer, 1994, 2002). This has been reflected in their socio-economic conditions (as detailed above) and also has been noted in schools. Religious bullying has been found in Bangalore wherein Muslim children have been thought of as ‘*Pakistani*’ or asked ‘*to go to Pakistan*’ (Erum, 2017; Nathan, 2019). Such experiences often become hidden barriers in the choice-making process.

In order to closely understand the atypical pattern and school choices among Muslims, we pursued a qualitative inquiry. Throughout this article, our focus is on the children’s experiences and perceptions that shape school choices among families. However, we also recognise that children cannot be thought of as isolated decision-makers in this process and

thereby we have included parents and teachers as informants. I (first author) was a participant observer at the four school sites (described in the data sections) and conducted 21 focus group discussions (FGD) with 190 children and in-depth interviews with 56 children, 14 teachers and 3 parents. Both authors were involved in the process of building the overall study design, pointers for FGDs and semi-structured interview questions. We used inductive coding to analyse the data and derive themes. We present the data site-wise to capture the situatedness of school choice.

### **Site I: Government School: Vidyabhav Government High School (VGHS)<sup>3</sup>**

VGHS was a state-run high school, which provided education free of cost. This included textbooks, uniforms and midday meals. It was also one among the 176 Karnataka Public Schools in the state which meant that it provided Kannada and English as mediums of instruction from Classes 1 to 12. All the children belonged to working-class families.<sup>4</sup> VGHS had 60% Hindu, 38% Muslim and 2% Christian students. This was an unusually high percentage of Muslim students in the school, though the proximity of a school to the place of residence has been found to be one of the strongest factors in its selection (Ohara, 2012; Srivastava, 2008; Woodhead et al., 2013). The school authorities informed me that the neighbourhood was not inhabited by a proportionate number of Muslim families. In fact, most of the Muslim children in VGHS travelled 15–20 km to get to the school from four different segregated Muslim neighbourhoods. Most of the children had joined the school in Class 8 because they did not have any state high school in their locality. Their families were unable to afford the available low-fee private schools, thus making the actual choice set much narrower than the estimated count of schools in the vicinity (Wilson, 2017). In choosing a school outside their localities, I found that parents' choice-making process partly relied on children's feedback from their previous schools and partly relied on informal networks which became the source of 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998). For example, Mazhar (14 years) said that 'my father's friend's son studies here...so I got to know about this school'. Students often spoke of how VGHS was different from the state schools in their localities which they attended before coming here. They described their previous schools to be lax about discipline and not 'serious' about teaching and even 'allowed copying during exams'. Another participant,

Shireen (14 years) said, 'When my mother found out that they were making us copy in exams, she started looking for another school...my neighbour suggested that this school is very good and then my mother put my sister and myself into this school'. However, standalone factors like discipline or quality education did not appear to adequately justify their decision to travel 15–20 km on a daily basis to VGHS or for not choosing another school at a similar distance. Therefore, though not explicitly stated, such 'hot knowledge' perhaps also provided information about the religious composition of the school as social mix has been an important factor in schooling choices among marginalised groups (Reay & Ball, 1997; Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019). This could also explain the high percentage of Muslim students in the school.

Though choosing VGHS ensured 'good' education with a suitable social mix, it required students to make adjustments that weighed heavily on them. The first concern was related to travel and safety. The commute to VGHS was tedious and involved traversing multiple transit points. For example, Azeem (14 years) said, 'I change 3 buses. I leave home at 7:30 am and reach school by 8:30 am, the roads are empty so it doesn't take much time'. Similarly, when I asked his classmate Zoya if this school was far, she replied, 'no...it is only 12 stops by bus'. The ease with which children like Zoya mentioned about their long journey to school was baffling.<sup>5</sup> They seemed to endure the commute to get a 'good' education free of cost which was linked to their future aspirations. Commuting also posed safety concerns, especially for girls. Sakina (15 years) was often reprimanded by the teachers due to her frequent absenteeism. She confided that she could come to school only when her cousin Mahi (studying in another class) also would come to school. Whenever Mahi was absent (due to sickness or housework), Sakina's parents felt it would be unsafe for her to travel alone. I found that most other Muslim girls had to travel with their siblings or close friends. Perhaps ensuring company for their girls could be a reason for parents to choose the same school for all their children unlike other studies that show parental preference of private schooling for boys (due to assumptions of better quality) and state schooling for girls (Hill et al., 2011; James & Woodhead, 2014). Additionally, unlike other studies where gendered conceptions of safety have shown to result in geographically restricted nature of school choices for girls (Gurney, 2018; Mehendale et al., 2015; Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2017), our study found that safety concerns are addressed by traversing the geographical distance in the company of siblings and peers.

The second concern was that the school had asked some children who were considered 'bright' to switch their language of instruction from Kannada to English and those considered 'weak' were not allowed to continue in English medium.<sup>6</sup> The school's perception that placed English at a higher level of difficulty was evident. For the child, a change in medium implies that (s)he would be abruptly learning all the subjects via a language of least proficiency from Class 8 onwards. For example, Kafeel, considered to be a 'weak' student, had previously studied in English medium, however, he said, 'but they did not take me here in English medium, so I had to shift to Kannada medium', whereas the ones considered 'bright' had faced the opposite. Two girls in Class 9, Razia and Zoya (both 14 years) and their brothers Rafee (13 years) and Noor (15 years) had previously studied in a Kannada medium state school. When they joined VGHS, Rafee and Noor were asked to switch to English medium, whereas Razia who had made the same request to the school authorities was not allowed to do so. Similarly, Rafee's classmate Jafar was also asked to switch from Kannada to English medium. When I discussed this with him, he said, 'I am trying to learn somehow, my sister teaches me'. Yet, parents did not 'voice' such concerns; rather, they asked their children to comply with school demands. Thus, there were choices within choices in which the school was at times able to make decisions on behalf of the children without taking their consent or parental approval. The school, concerned about its pass percentages, appeared to take on such an authoritarian role since the administrators could gauge that disadvantaged groups were not only serious about education but also had limited schooling options.

The seriousness about education and adjustments made to continue schooling at VGHS were linked to the perception of 'good' education as an essential means to upward mobility. However, the link between education and employment had gendered implications. Some families encouraged girls to study whereas others asked them to stop after Class 10. For example, Tabina's (13 years) parents had recommended that she does a diploma after Class 10. She mentioned that her parents say that 'our kids should not suffer the way we have'. Similarly, Shireen said, 'I want to do something in life, and I want to take care of my parents... since a very young age she used to work in other people's houses, in fact, my mother used to work at her own uncle's place and he used to not give her food if she did not work, she suffered a lot. She wants me and my sister to study and do well'. Whereas Rabab said, 'I want to study but my mother is saying 10th is enough...they will encourage boys (to study



further) .... I wanted to become a police officer, but I have to listen to my mom, they won't allow me to work'. Like Rabab, Ghazal, who had just completed Class 10 with distinction was frustrated since she was keen on pursuing further studies, however, her father did not permit her. Her mother told me that she failed to convince Ghazal's father to allow their daughter to study. He had remained firm in his position that he did not see a point in educating her further since he felt he had already risked her safety by sending her to school and in the future Ghazal would not be allowed to work anyway.

When it came to boys, many of them were expected to join work to provide financial support to their families. Noor had already started working part-time as a door-to-door newspaper distributor before coming to school. Such an expectation was common for boys, and they expressed their dilemmas between choosing further education and employment. Faizan (13 years) said, 'My grandmother insists that I take up a job, but I want to study', whereas Mazhar (14 years) said, 'My father wants me to study further but I want to work so that my mother doesn't have to work in the batti (incense stick) factory.... I have already thought of joining one of my brothers at his workplace'. Gendered negotiations were not uniform within families, while some retained role expectations of male-bread-winner and female caregiver, for others these were overridden by the drive to move away from their class realities through education.

Social class emerged as the most prominent factor for the students choosing VGHS as government schools have become the only option for the marginalised and 'voiceless' (Mehendale & Raha, 2020). It is also important to note that here that social class dovetails with geographical marginalisation due to religion. As Bangalore is strongly segregated in its religious demography (Susewind, 2017), social class further determined the geographical location of these families within the city and the segregated, marginalised homes therein. This was directly linked to the availability of state schools in their localities which provided education free of cost. State schools that were available up to Class 7 were also described to be lacking in quality education. Beyond this, Muslim children and their parents had to exit the state's primary schooling like every child does, however, the lack of access to secondary state schooling (geographically marginalised due to overlap of religion and class) and inability to access private schooling (economically marginalised) made their choices heavily constrained to an extent that the existence of choice becomes questionable (James & Woodhead,

2014). Yet, there was a need for continuing education since it was perceived to be a crucial means towards upward mobility (as shown by Jeffrey et al., 2004). A 'good' school like VGHS was chosen (through 'hot knowledge') though it required several negotiations of long commute, concerns of safety and a changed medium of instruction for some.

## **Site 2: Government Aided Minority School: Luminous High School (LHS)**

LHS was a minority, state-aided English medium school, particularly for Muslim students, which provided education at a minimal cost for classes between lower kindergarten and 12. Along with aided sections, it also had low-fee unaided sections. LHS followed the state board curriculum and also had moral or religious education as one subject (40 minutes/week). Like VGHS, all the children belonged to working-class families. Their commute to school was between 2 and 6 km. As my fieldwork coincided with the reopening of the school for the academic year, I noticed that there was an influx of students in Class 8. Some of them had the same reason as students of VGHS: they did not have government high schools in their localities. A large number of such new students came from Urdu medium state schools.<sup>7</sup> Since there are only eight Urdu medium high schools in Bangalore, it has been found that most of the students switched their medium of instruction to join Kannada or English medium government schools or dropped out altogether (Ahmed, 2013; Vaijayanti, 2011).<sup>8</sup> In other studies, parents and students have marked the state's neglect towards education of Muslims as an obvious part of religious marginalisation (Ahmed, 2013; Hussain, 2010). I observed the same at LHS, where students switched their medium from Urdu to English in Class 8 as they were indirectly forced to 'exit' the system. When I asked them about the switch, students said that since LHS was a minority-based school that housed Muslim teachers, they had hoped that the teachers would explain the lesson in Urdu in case they were unable to understand. Additionally, there was a provision to choose Urdu as one of the language subjects which was not provided in an overwhelming majority of the state and private schools. LHS also provided a bridge course for students who were changing the medium. Thus, students strongly relied on the social capital at the school for academic success (Goddard, 2003). Apart from these academically supportive norms, LHS

also provided other forms of social and emotional support (Bryk et al., 1993) described below.

Mr. Mahib, a senior teacher, responsible for taking student-parent interviews during the admission processes at LHS for many years, said that Muslim students from other schools experienced subtle forms of discrimination:

And you know in today's time they (parents) want to select a Muslim institution because there will be some indirect harassment in other schools. I've come to know from two parents that Muslim students had been looked at in a different way. Some partiality and some harassment is there and sometimes they directly tell the students that when you have your own institutions why do you come here. Why don't you go there? So, this creeps into the minds of the parents and students and then they leave.

Discrimination and prejudices (based on caste, class, etc.) form invisible social barriers, which are often overlooked within school choices (Hill et al., 2011; Ramachandran, 2004). These examples show that marginalisation due to religion can impact school choices at a structural level (as in the case of Urdu medium schools) or “softer” social or hidden normative barriers that may be informally inserted into formal and informal schooling interactions, resulting in exclusion’ (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016, p. 564). In all these cases Muslim families prefer to ‘exit’ rather than to ‘voice’ their concerns, while choosing LHS for its social capital.

Even in the absence of discrimination, there were concerns regarding moral upbringing and dress code, especially for girls. Children pointed out that choosing to study in a minority institution had obvious advantages of an ‘Islamic’ atmosphere. This meant that their school would be in-line with the religious values at home. The moral education classes and having an option to pray in the school were examples of this. For girls, wearing a hijab as part of the uniform was comforting. Zameena (14 years) described her family to be religious and since she shifted her residence, her parents were keen on a school which would allow hijab though there were very few options available. When I asked her if she felt her parents were being very strict, she said, ‘No, I don’t think so, I agree with them, it is not like I want to go another way. My parents don’t say that only religion is important, they emphasise on school education. Even in my previous school, only one subject was religious education’. A very similar need (for modern education in an Islamic environment) was echoed by working-class Muslim parents in Delhi while choosing schools (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2017) and was also found on the supply side in Hyderabad

(Sarangapani, 2021). In addition to this, Zameena mentioned that all her cousins were forcing her to join the school in which they were studying but she refused since she preferred LHS. Similarly, her classmates mentioned that their previous schools (both private and government) did not allow headscarves and they also did not like wearing skirts, which was a reason to change over to LHS. These conversations helped me understand that parental choice was not simply imposed on the children, rather there was a back-and-forth between them and parents before a school was chosen. When I interviewed Madiha, a parent whose three daughters were studying in LHS, she said that while searching schools she found that most schools did not have any religious education, prayer facility and hijab in their uniforms, and among those which had, very few were affordable. Since LHS had both these factors, she said it was an attractive choice. She did not want her daughters to become homemakers like her, rather she was keen on them having good careers in the future, yet not having to leave the hijab for education. Thus, marginalised groups may feel alienated due to exclusion of their sociocultural or religious symbols within schools (Amatullah & Dixit, 2022) and may gravitate towards choosing schools that acknowledge that the child is at an intersection between the home and school worlds, thus making learning more flexible and leading to positive development (Bryk et al., 1993; Kumar, 1989).

The intersection of religion, social class and gender became evident in making LHS as a school choice. LHS's reputation for being a minority institution made it an attractive choice for many working-class Muslim families who could bear a minimal expenditure for education. Some Muslim students and their parents who faced religious discrimination and restrictions on hijab in other schools chose LHS, while other students from Urdu-medium primary schools chose LHS assuming the possibility of at least verbally receiving their lessons in vernacular. The latter had no other option but to either change their medium of instruction to continue education or exit completely. Many students and parents considered the continuation of religious values to be important while regular education had still been the focal point. LHS fulfilled both these aspects, more importantly, at an affordable fee. Having an 'Islamic atmosphere' meant that children would be taught basic Islamic morals, they could offer daily prayers and wear hijabs (for girls). Thus, LHS enabled several forms of support to minority children—academic support for those who joined from Urdu medium schools, protection from religious discrimination and a continuation of religious values from their homes to the school.

### **Site 3: Private Faith-Based School: Magnum Opus Islamic School (MOIS)**

MOIS is a private faith-based Islamic school, 9 years into its inception. Most of the students belonged to middle-income families.<sup>9</sup> The school's annual fee was about 50,000 ₹. The principal of the school who was actively involved in community work mentioned that she had met several middle-income Muslim families who were concerned about the lack of Islamic values in their children's education. Such private faith-based Islamic school initiatives in Bangalore have only been a phenomenon in the last decade. These schools were founded with the purpose of providing Islamic religious education alongside a regular curriculum (affiliated to international boards like IB or IGCSE or central board [CBSE] or state board [SSLC]). MOIS adhered to the state board syllabus for the regular curriculum, and for religious education, the books were sourced from a private publisher. The number of hours allocated (120 minutes/week) and the overall curriculum for religious education was more rigorous as compared to LHS.

The analysis of the choices showed that MOIS was at the nexus of the following four major benefits: regular education, religious education/values (Islamic history, understanding Quran, moral values, code of conduct, wearing hijab, daily prayers), protection from exclusion and the assurance of a 'right' social mix. There was a great variation in how students and their families weighed in these factors together. These factors were often complexly intertwined with each other.

First, the combination of having religious and regular education was the most commonly cited reason to choose MOIS. As one student concisely put it, 'Islamic values and academics both are done' whereas others detailed their religious education curriculum and its benefits. Few teachers said that learning and the practice of religion within the school was essential for children as it was a means to protect their faith. Such a phenomenon has been studied by Cohen-Zada (2006) among Christians, and by Shah (2012) among Muslims, who found that minority religious groups actively choose schools to preserve religious identity through religious education. For Indian Muslim students and families seeking religious education (as also seen for some students at LHS), preserving religious identity is not only due to their minority status. Given the contemporary political context in India, it can be considered as an oppositional or counter response that is often seen in individuals who perceive threat to their social identity<sup>10,11</sup> (Fischer et al., 2010; Ysseldyk

et al., 2011). In other parts of the world, it has been found that religiosity among Muslims deepened as the hostility in their environments increased (Connor, 2010) and this has resulted in increased inclination to learn, practice and assert religious identity (Peek, 2005). Likewise in India, the commitment to religious education might have increased due to marginalisation of Muslims on several socio-economic fronts (Metcalf, 2007). However, the need to receive mainstream education has remained attractive for the socio-economic prospects it provides. Thus, faith-based schools like MOIS catered to this specific need without any compromise on regular schooling. Since these were private, fee-paying schools, they became a part of the school choice set only for those who could afford them.

At MOIS, a closer analysis of this combination revealed that it was not just having the two types of education together, rather the balance between regular and religious education was crucial during the choice-making process. One student said she had left an Islamic school because she did not like the fact that the school emphasised religious values/education more than regular education. Such a need for balance became more evident when I learnt that MOIS had witnessed noticeable student attrition 2 years ago when the management decided to move from central board syllabus to state board syllabus due to some difficulties in accreditation. Interviews with teachers revealed that families perceived the central board syllabus to be superior to the state board in terms of the quality and level of difficulty. From children's perspective, Maisha (14 years) explained that she was also planning to leave MOIS because her parents wanted her to gain better quality education (central board syllabus) even if religious education or values were absent. All her cousins went to convent schools with central board syllabus, and education was taken very seriously in her family. Maisha's mother also wanted her to study the whole book to gain knowledge, not just for the sake of exams. She was also unhappy that some chapters were altogether omitted from teaching at MOIS. When I asked about her views, Maisha said that she was in agreement with her mother and was willing to change her school in the coming year. Such a serious commitment towards mainstream education has been found to be a quintessential element among the middle classes, despite their heterogeneities (Ball, 2003; Reay et al., 2011). For many other children who continued at MOIS, they mentioned that the change of board was disappointing, yet it did not result in a different school choice due to their stronger preference for religious education and values. The change of board

made clear that MOIS had been previously perceived as the ‘best of both worlds’ as it had catered to a larger middle-income group when it adhered to a central board syllabus. It had been viable for those who considered regular education as primary and religious education as secondary, yet important and vice versa.

Second, choosing a faith-based school prevented any religion-based exclusion at schools and in-turn ensured the ‘right’ social (religious) mix. For instance, while discussing their experiences in their previous schools, Safeer (13 years) said that his father chose MOIS for him when he was only 5 years old though the commute was about an hour long. He mentioned that in his previous (private) school he was expected to take part in *pooja* every day, and when his father came across a brochure of MOIS he was quick to change over. Safeer’s father had not actively looked for a faith-based school, however, he was definitely discomforted by the school’s mandate for all children to engage in Hindu religious worship. Other school-based research in India has also shown the observance of majoritarian religious practices in regular (private or government) schools (Amatullah, 2022; Bénéï, 2008; Nambissan, 2010a; Thapan, 2014). However, its impact on school choices has not been discussed so far. Safeer’s classmate Faria joined MOIS when she was 9 years old. Initially, she said she left her previous (private) school due to corporal punishment. She said, ‘they used to beat us with a stick... my mother did not like that and also there were other problems.... Like it was a Hindu school (lowering her voice a lot) because of hijab restriction’.<sup>12</sup> Faria described that though her mother was not very religious, she wanted Faria to go to ‘at least a Muslim school’ so that she could also learn Islamic values. In both the examples of Safeer and Faria, the exclusion (by virtue of religion) in their former school spaces became an important guiding factor in making a faith-based school their next choice. This shows how class capital trumped by religion-based exclusion impacts school-choices. A simple change over to any other private school could possibly result in the same kind of exclusion. These examples also show that very young children may not be involved in the initial parental choice-making process, however, their schooling experiences/feedback can be pivotal for parents to take alternative options.

Third, seeking the right social mix was at the intersection of religion, social class and gender. In the previous section, due to exclusion in other schools, the right religious mix became most important. However, I found that quite a few children had migrated to MOIS though they had

the right kind of religious mix in their previous schools. Their previous schools were either Islamic schools or non-faith-based schools with a large number of Muslim students. The concerns in these schools were mostly discussed by boys. They were troubled by smoking habits and the use of foul language among peers. While discussing this aspect, Haider (14 years) and a few other boys associated ‘bad influence’ with Muslim children who belonged to working classes and how their parents wanted to avoid such a mix. By changing over to MOIS, such parents who had earlier given importance only to religious mix refined their choices further by ensuring a suitable class mix, especially for boys in the context of their non-academic social learning. Within marginalised groups, there are a variety of subject positions when categories like race, class and gender intersect (Moore, 2008) and there can be a distancing from ‘other’ members of the same group which plays out in the choice-making process (Ball et al., 2013).

The choice patterns at MOIS were layered and complex as compared to VGHS and LHS as the social class position of these families—mainly the ability to afford private school fees resulted in a relatively expanded choice set. MOIS’s emphasis on religious education along with regular education (a foundational tenet) was the most prominent reason for choosing this school—often considered a means to protect their faith. However, MOIS’s change of board (for regular education) from central to state was revealing the need for balance between the two. For the ones who left after this change, regular education outweighed religious education, whereas for the ones who stayed, despite being discontent with the change, religious education still weighed higher. A faith-based school also automatically ensured the ‘right’ religious mix and it attracted those who faced exclusion (based on religion) in other schools. Yet, there was a class angle to seeking the right mix. MOIS became a choice for those middle-income Muslim families, who were concerned about their boys mingling with ‘other’ Muslim boys who belonged to the working classes. For such parents, MOIS ensured a suitable class mix along with a religious mix. Thus, MOIS was chosen after sifting through other faith-based or non-faith based private schools at the intersections of religion, gender and class. This complexity in the choice-making process can be fully understood by considering class as a multidimensional concept, which intersects with other forms of cultural capital (Seghers et al., 2019) or socially disadvantaged positions due to race/religion.



#### **Site 4: Madrasah (School for Religious Education): Dar-ul-Bayaan (DUB) and Jamia Ma'arifa (JM)<sup>13</sup>**

DUB and JM were two privately run, residential girls' madrasahs offering religious education at a moderate cost (roughly 2,000–3,000 per month with food and accommodation). They often made fee concessions for those in need. There were 210 and 102 girls between 12 and 19 years of age respectively, all identified as Muslims, belonging to different states across India. Their syllabus contained only religious subjects. At JM, there were additional weekly classes for vocational training in tailoring, learning basic skills in computers and Kannada language. Since these two madrasahs belonged to different ideologies/schools of thought within Islam, their syllabi and pedagogies were slightly different. I found that before joining these madrasahs, the girls had been previously enrolled in regular schools since the minimum age criteria for enrolment in these schools was 11–12 years. The class composition among the students at both madrasahs was mixed. This was different from the popular notion that only the most marginalised students attend madrasahs due to lack of any other schooling option in their localities (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2006). Since the madrasahs in this study charged a moderate fee, and they housed children from different states and social classes, the discussion on religious school choice can be broadened.

Despite scholarly agreement regarding the paucity of data available to understand enrolments in madrasahs post-independence (Iyer, 2018), there are several assumptions about Indian Muslims making madrasahs as their school choice. Two of the most commonly cited ones are—one, the issues of availability and accessibility of schools in Muslim localities (as stated earlier) and two, that Muslim parents are opposed to modern schooling. The first one, though may be true for certain regions in the country, overlooks the heterogeneity of madrasah education (Alam, 2011; Iyer, 2018). Our analysis revealed two clear reasons for choosing madrasahs. One, children were keen on acquiring religious education, in some cases despite parental discouragement. Two, madrasahs formed absolute safe spaces for those who faced discrimination in other schools.

With respect to the first point, some girls said they opted for the madrasahs since their parents encouraged them to take up religious studies. Several studies have shown parental religiosity to be an important factor in selecting religious education for their children (Asadullah et al., 2015; Cohen-Zada, 2006). At both the madrasahs in this study, the girls had mentioned that they willingly took up madrasah education (recall

that the girls were previously enrolled in regular schools at least up to Class 6 or higher). Interestingly, for some of them, this was not the case as their parents wanted them to continue regular school education. These girls had opposed their parents to opt out of regular schools. In an FGD, Mahira (13 years, 3rd year student, DUB) said, 'I had come here for a brief course during the summer break and from then I wanted to study in a madrasah.... I kept telling my parents I don't want to go to school but my parents would not allow me to leave and join here...so I ran away from the house and stayed in my neighbour's house for 3 days and finally my parents understood that I won't agree to go to school, and they were convinced to send me here...now it's alright'. Her classmate Wabisa similarly said, 'I fought at home because I wanted to come here and study'. I also met Hashmat (15 years), a summer course student at DUB who was at crossroads in making a choice between regular and madrasah education. She had completed her class 10 exams in a regular school where she was one among the few high scorers. When I asked her what she would be doing in the future, she said, 'I wanted to become a doctor.... But I had come here 3 years back and stayed for 44 days and since then do not want to go back to school. I was so interested in pursuing religious studies. Now I feel like coming here again, but my parents are asking me to pursue 11th. I am yet to decide'. These findings especially highlight the role of children in the choice-making process. Moreover, in religious school-choice children's views have rarely been discussed though we know that children are not passive recipients of parental or societal religious messages (Hemming & Madge, 2012). These narratives point to an intrinsic value of religious education in the minds of children. As I discussed further with them, all the girls affirmed they were keen and interested in pursuing these subjects as one of them put it, 'we get the most beneficial knowledge here...we learn what is most important for our life and we can also teach it to others'. Shah (2006, 2012) discusses this knowledge from an Islamic perspective. She explains that seeking knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim and here religious knowledge is encompassing of social (familial, economic and political) and personal (development of psychological, moral and spiritual self) aspects. It is in accordance with these principles which a Muslim conducts his/her life for the sake of God. Therefore, madrasah or Islamic education is said to look beyond imparting knowledge or ensuring employability, and more importantly promote values that develop individuals and thus, societies (Shah, 2012).

Moving to the second point, the girls discussed the reasons for leaving their former schools due to discrimination or due to not being allowed to wear hijab. Rukhsana (19 years, JM) left regular schooling due to covert forms of discrimination. She said, 'In Ramadan, they won't allow Muslims to fast in the school...in my school, PT sir force fed many boys and girls...or they would make sports as a reason... means they would keep sports and dance (during this month) which would tire the students totally and then they would give water...and when we tried to quit activities (like dance) they said it is compulsory... it went on for 10 days and then we told our parents and they finally came and spoke to them'. This experience had made Rukhsana bitter and she opted for a madrasah as it assured complete protection from such discrimination and also allowed her to freely practice essential elements of her faith. In some cases, parents displayed caution in choosing a madrasah. Zubeida's (16 years, JM) family was one such example. She said, 'because the outside situation is not so good... (*mahaul kharaab hai*), they are targeting Muslims more so that's why my parents suggested that madrasah is a better option'. Detrimental effects (both academic and psychological) of discrimination/Islamophobia in schools towards Muslim students due to their religious identities has been well documented in many parts of the world (Abbas, 2004; Aroian, 2012; Elkassem et al., 2018; Farooqui & Kaushik, 2020).

Further, there were gendered concerns of veiling in our study. Similar to the girls at LHS, most of them were not comfortable wearing skirts to school, especially in co-educational spaces. As Dania (14 years, DUB) elaborated, 'I left the school because pardah cannot be maintained there...we have to wear skirts, so my father said it's better to leave...and then there was an option to join a girls' school or madrasah.... I felt the best option was to join a madrasah'. Nabeela (19 years, JM) had completed her 12th standard and was training to become a pilot. 'I was doing a course for pilot training in Chennai...since it was Muslim place, I could manage for some time...but later on a trainer came and he said why are you wearing this hijab you can't go forward with this in this line...you have to cut your hair...and when I had to go to US, that time also because of my identity it was very hard during the interview...even if I had gone forward then it would have been hard for me so I left it'. Once she quit the course, she went back and forth between joining a graduation course and the madrasah until she finally decided on the latter. Her parents had asked her to make the decision. As previously

discussed in the case of LHS, a discontinuity of values between home and school had made madrasah a viable choice.

Since the age-criteria to join madrasahs was 11–12 years, most of the girls had previously studied in regular schools. As in LHS and MOIS, religious discrimination/exclusion or dress code restrictions were important reasons for students choosing DUB or JM. While some parents had encouraged them to switch to madrasah education, in other cases girls had faced resistance from their families when they wanted to switch. In both cases, the choice of studying at a full-time madrasah revealed more details about the importance of religious education for these students.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Through this article, we have demonstrated that Muslim children's experiences and agency are important aspects of the choice-making process, which are in a constant dialogue with parental decisions. Future research must acknowledge and take this account rather than being limited to a singular, parental stance. By using a qualitative approach with an intersectional lens, we were able to capture a variety of subject positions, at the juncture of religion, class and gender, that resulted in school choices and their changing dynamics. Our findings challenge the hegemonic discourses within Indian education that label marginalised or disadvantaged groups as disinterested in schooling (Srivastava, 2007), particularly Muslim families labelled as opposed to 'western' education thus preferring religious education (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2006). Rather, Muslim children and parents in our study maintained a serious commitment about acquiring regular school education. Though children did not have a state secondary high school in their area, children at VGHS, including girls, travelled a long distance to seek 'good' education. This was different from previous studies (except Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2017) that suggest that Muslim girls were not sent to school altogether due to lack of schools in the neighbourhood (MacArthur Foundation study, as cited in Chanana, 2021). Instead, we found that gendered safety concerns were mitigated by travelling with peers. The commitment towards education was present across social classes, however, the breadth of choice set for different income groups and thus their negotiations varied accordingly. Students (working class), at both LHS

and VGHS children with a narrow choice set, accepted a change in the medium of instruction, despite its high level of difficulty, in order to complete their schooling. Students (middle-income) at MOIS, on the other hand, were able to choose from a variety of private schools which fulfilled additional prerequisites apart from regular education. However, it must be noted that this flexibility due to higher affordability did not always hold true, especially in the face of religious discrimination.

When it came to switching between schools, an important factor that resulted in an exit was the differential levels of discrimination/exclusion in schools. These varied from being subtle to more serious forms: being asked to take part in Hindu religious rituals, not being allowed to wear hijabs, being force fed during Ramadan fast. In such instances, Muslim children and parents sought schools which were accommodative of their religious values/practices. For middle-income families, this meant that despite their class capital, the choice set had been narrowed. Existing research has demonstrated that class inequalities and the resulting variation in social capital result in different choice sets and often maintain class segregation in school selection (Majumdar, 2021). Such understandings can be expanded by an intersectional lens, which provides greater nuance to such a simplistic understanding. Further, we found that even in the absence of exclusion, a preference for an Islamic environment and religious education was present. This could be attributed either to the sociopolitical threat with respect to their religion or to the intrinsic value of religious education itself. In understanding school choices among marginalised groups, researchers must take into account the various dimensions of marginality, for example, race, poverty and geographical boundaries are strongly linked (Reichard, 2014). At the same time, certain factors that alleviate marginality may result in relatively expanded choice sets. Only when these are contextualised and qualitatively analysed can a complete picture be painted.

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## Notes

- 1 RTE provides free and compulsory education (up to Class 8) in government schools but also allocates 25% seats to economically weaker sections (EWS) or disadvantaged groups in private unaided schools.
- 2 State enrolment patterns here are discussed since specific district data for Bangalore has not been recorded.
- 3 Pseudonyms have been used for all the schools and the participants involved in the study to protect their identity.
- 4 Working class refers to families from lower socio-economic groups wherein their parents worked as daily wage workers at construction sites, as auto-drivers or as house-helpers. Their income ranges between 100 and 300 thousand per annum.
- 5 All children studying in government or state run primary schools (up to Class 7, sometimes includes Class 8) in Karnataka are required to choose another secondary school (for Classes 8–10), however, such a long commute to access a school was not found among students belonging to other religious groups.
- 6 Kannada medium state schools had English as an additional subject, whereas Kannada was the medium of instruction for all the other subjects.
- 7 Schools with vernacular languages as their medium of instruction are associated with their region or geographical location in India, however Urdu medium schools have become synonymous with religious identity, since only Muslim students opt for these schools. For a detailed discussion of politicisation of Hindi-Urdu see Orsini (2009).
- 8 For 180 Urdu medium primary schools only 8 secondary schools are available, it has been found that few students who wanted to continue their education in Urdu travelled 15–20 kms to reach the nearest available secondary school.
- 9 This study acknowledges middle-income as a vastly heterogenous group (Baviskar & Ray, 2011; Fernandes, 2006) in India with a range economic, social, symbolic and cultural capitals (Nambissan, 2010b).
- 10 For a historical understanding of feelings of threat and Muslims' commitment to preserve their faith (see Metcalf, 2007).
- 11 Historically, the first idea of establishing schools with modern and religious education dates back to 1944 by Sayyed Abdul Ala Maududi when a threat to the Muslim identity was experienced in years leading up to the Partition in 1947 (Sikand, 2009).
- 12 Her reference to a Hindu school did not mean it was a faith-based school, rather she referred to a regular private school as a 'Hindu school' to indicate that the practices, majority of the students and the management were Hindu.
- 13 The first author, being female, could not get full access to a boys' madrasah. Shorter periods of access would not suffice for an ethnographic study; therefore, girls' madrasahs were chosen for the study.

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