

Sustaining Aspiration: A Review of Coping, Support and Educational Ambition Among Muslim Students in India

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Abstract—Indian Muslims occupy a paradoxical position in higher education. They constitute roughly fourteen per cent of the national population yet account for only 4.87 per cent of higher-education enrolment (Ministry of Education, 2024), and in 2020–21 they were the only socio-religious group to register an *absolute* decline in enrolment. Scholarship on this gap has concentrated overwhelmingly on documenting barriers like discrimination, poverty and institutional neglect while paying comparatively little attention to how Muslim students who do enter and persist in higher education sustain their ambition. This scoping review maps the fragmented literature on the coping strategies and the familial, community and institutional support systems that underpin the educational aspirations of Muslim students in India. Drawing on the capability-based concept of the “capacity to aspire,” stress-and-coping theory and the community cultural wealth framework, it synthesises the evidence across four themes, exposes a persistent deficit orientation in the field, and argues that the principal failure sustaining under-representation is institutional rather than communal.

Index Terms—*Muslim students; educational aspiration; coping strategies; social support; higher education in India; resilience*

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely regarded as a fundamental human right and a principal engine of social mobility, expanding individual capabilities and interrupting the reproduction of inequality across generations (Sen, 1999). For India’s largest religious minority, however, the promise of education remains conspicuously unfulfilled. The Sachar Committee (2006) established the empirical baseline for contemporary debate, documenting that Muslims trailed most socio-religious communities across development indicators and, on several educational measures, fell below even the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Nearly

two decades later, the Post-Sachar Evaluation Committee found the community’s relative position substantially unchanged (Kundu, 2014).

This is not a recent predicament but a durable structural feature. Demographic and socio-economic profiles assembled well before Sachar already located Muslims among the most disadvantaged communities on income, occupation and educational attainment (Mistry, 2005), and their persistent under-representation in the civil services and salaried public employment signalled a broader foreclosure of opportunity (Najiullah, 2006). The educational deficit, in other words, has long been entangled with a deficit of the destinations that make education worth pursuing.

The most recent official statistics sharpen the picture. Of the 43.3 million students enrolled in Indian higher education in 2021–22, only about 2.1 million (around 4.87 per cent) were Muslim, against a population share of roughly fourteen per cent (Ministry of Education, 2024). Within institutions of national importance, the figure falls to 1.76 per cent. More striking still, the 2020–21 survey recorded an absolute fall in Muslim enrolment of over 1.79 lakh students, a contraction without parallel among socio-religious groups in recent memory (Jaffrelot, 2023). Uttar Pradesh alone accounted for roughly thirty-six per cent of that national decline, even as Dalit, Adivasi and Other Backward Class enrolment continued to rise. The divergence is instructive: where guaranteed opportunity structures exist, participation has expanded; where they are absent, it has stalled or reversed.

The dominant response of the research community has been to catalogue the obstacles Muslim students confront—communal discrimination, financial hardship, residential segregation, weak school foundations and institutional indifference (Basant,

2012; Sachar, 2006). This literature is indispensable, yet it is curiously silent on the obverse question. Given the density of these barriers, how do the Muslim students who *do* reach and remain in higher education manage to sustain their ambition? What psychological resources do they mobilise, and what networks of family, community and institution hold their aspirations in place? A barriers-only lens risks a subtle deficit framing in which Muslim students appear only as the passive residue of structural disadvantage, never as agents who navigate, contest and persist.

This review is organised around that neglected question. In scope, it privileges empirical work published from 2006 onward, taking the Sachar Report as a natural watershed concerning higher education and the senior-secondary transition. Because the India-specific evidence base on coping and support is thin, international scholarship on Muslim-minority students is drawn in as a distinct comparative corpus, used to generate hypotheses about the Indian case rather than to make claims about it.

1.1. Objectives of the Review

In keeping with this reframing, the review pursues four objectives:

1. To map the coping strategies documented among Muslim and comparable minority students in higher education.
2. To characterise the familial, community and institutional support systems that underpin their educational ambition.
3. To locate these findings within contemporary theories of aspiration and cultural capital.

4. To identify the research gaps that a focused programme of Indian inquiry must address, and to set an agenda for future research.

II. LITERATURE SEARCH METHODOLOGY

This review adopts a scoping design rather than a systematic one, because the evidence on the coping and support of Indian Muslim students is emergent and uneven rather than mature and standardised. Scoping reviews are the appropriate method for mapping such a literature and for making explicit where knowledge is absent (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The review follows the reporting conventions of the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (Tricco et al., 2018). Searches combined four international databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC and JSTOR, with South Asian sources often missed by broad indexes, namely Shodhganga, the Economic and Political Weekly archive and IndianJournals.com, and with grey literature: the Sachar Report (2006), the Post-Sachar Evaluation (Kundu, 2014), successive All India Survey on Higher Education releases and the India Discrimination Report (Oxfam India, 2022). The search string paired three concept blocks: *population* (Muslim OR minority), *outcome* (aspiration OR ambition OR expectation) and *mechanism* (coping OR resilience OR support OR “social capital”) with a geographic filter that isolated the Indian corpus and was relaxed to surface comparative international studies when domestic yield was low.

Records were then screened against the eligibility criteria set out in Table 1.

Table 1. *Inclusion and exclusion criteria.*

Dimension	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time frame	Published from 2006 onward (post-Sachar Report).	Published before 2006.
Thematic focus	Addresses educational aspiration, ambition or its sustaining mechanisms (coping, resilience, support).	Demographic or enrolment data with no reference to student experience; no aspiration or support construct.
Education level	Higher education or the senior-secondary transition.	Studies confined to primary or elementary schooling.
Population	Muslim students, or comparable religious or ethnic minority students.	Non-student samples; undifferentiated general-population studies.
Study type	Empirical work (quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods) and substantive committee or policy reports.	Opinion pieces, editorials and non-empirical commentary.
Language	English, Hindi or Urdu.	Publications in other languages.
Geographic scope	India as the primary corpus; international Muslim-minority studies retained as a separate comparative corpus.	No study excluded solely on geographic grounds.

Included studies were charted into a standard extraction matrix, recording author, setting, design, sample, aspiration measure and support construct, and interpreted through the three-stage thematic synthesis of Thomas and Harden (2008), which extends the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) to secondary synthesis. Two caveats apply: screening

was conducted by a single reviewer, with a fifth of records independently double-screened to gauge reliability; and the scarcity of Indian primary studies renders several themes provisional rather than settled. The selection process is summarised in Figure 1, and the principal studies constituting the evidence base in Table 2.

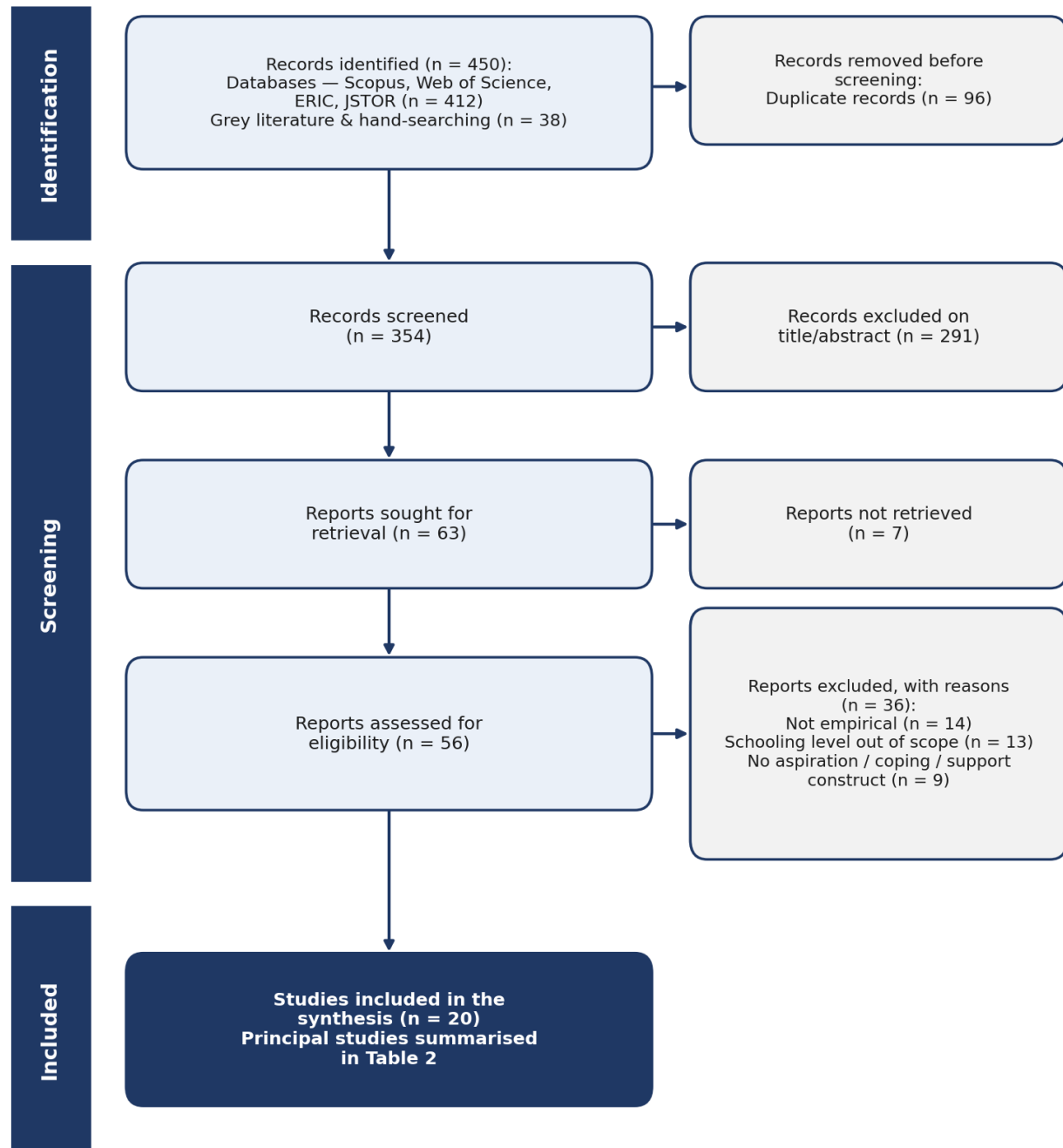


Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR flow of the study identification and selection process.

Note. Counts summarise the screening protocol described in Section 2; researchers replicating the

search should report their own screening tallies for the search date.

Table 2. *Summary of key literature reviewed.*

Author (Year)	Context / Sample	Design	Key findings relevant to the review
Mistry (2005)	India; national, Census-based profile	Secondary demographic analysis	Documents Muslims' pre-Sachar disadvantage across income, occupation and educational attainment.
Sachar Committee (2006)	India; national	Government committee report	Benchmark evidence that Muslims trail most communities and fall below SC/ST on several educational measures.
Najiullah (2006)	India; civil services	Documentary / report analysis	Persistent under-representation of Muslims in the IAS, IPS and public employment — a foreclosed opportunity structure.
Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery (2008)	Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh; 425 young Muslim men	Ethnographic qualitative	Education often failed to yield salaried work, producing “educated unemployment” that depresses others' aspiration.
Alam (2009)	West Bengal	Empirical spatial analysis	A larger Muslim population share correlates with greater deficiency in social and physical infrastructure.
Basant (2012)	India; NSSO rounds (1999–2010)	Quantitative analysis	Perceived discrimination and unfairness in opportunities shape Muslim participation in education and work.
Kundu (2014)	India; national	Government evaluation committee	Finds little post-Sachar progress; warns against the erosion of minority scholarships and fellowships.
Alam (2015)	India	Analytical / secondary	Muslim middle-class formation aided by community networks, affirmative action and Gulf remittances.
Jilani (2015)	USA; Muslim high-school students	Qualitative	Student experience varies with the density of the Muslim presence within an institution.
Amjad (2018)	Canada; Muslim school students	Qualitative	Climate deteriorated around teaching of contentious events; students used selective disclosure and identity management.
Abrenica (2021)	Public high school; a Muslim learner	Qualitative case study	Positive experience alongside a desire for representation; recommends curricular inclusion and Muslim staff.
Malik (2023)	India; Muslim women	Review / analysis	Theorises a “double disadvantage” of religion and gender in educational access and quality.
Salman (2023)	Delhi / North India; Muslim youth	Sequential mixed-methods	Advances “frustrated freedom”: high aspiration constrained by limited opportunity and marginalisation.
Balani & Bhatt (2024)	Young adults	Empirical (survey)	Self-efficacy, perseverance and grit are interlinked, cultivable determinants of career aspiration.
Ministry of Education / AISHE (2024)	India; national enrolment survey	Official statistical survey	Muslim enrolment at 4.87%; records the recent absolute decline concentrated in Uttar Pradesh.

Note. Table 2 presents the principal empirical and documentary studies informing the synthesis. Theoretical anchors — Appadurai (2004), Sen (1999),

Ray (2006), Yosso (2005), Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Pargament et al. (2000) — are discussed in Section 3 and listed in the References.

III. THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Four analytical themes emerged from the synthesis: the structural conditions within which aspiration is formed; the individual and religious coping strategies students deploy; the familial and community wealth that sustains ambition; and the institutional supports that variously enable or erode it. The themes are presented as concentric circles of support, moving outward from the individual student to the institution and the state.

3.1 *Aspiration Under Structural Constraint*

Aspiration is not an autonomous psychological trait but a socially scaffolded capacity, unevenly distributed across a stratified society. Appadurai (2004) conceives the “capacity to aspire” as a navigational competence, the ability to read the pathways between a present condition and a desired future that the powerful exercise readily and the marginalised are compelled to ration. This complements Sen’s (1999) capability approach, in which what matters is not merely the goods a person holds but the substantive freedom to convert them into valued functionings. Ray’s (2006) notion of the “aspiration window” adds a spatial dimension: individuals draw the raw material of ambition from the lives they can observe in their cognitive neighbourhood, so that residential and social segregation narrows the very horizon of the imaginable.

The Indian evidence bears out the analytical distinction between wanting and being able. Studying young Muslim men in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh, Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery (2008) found that formal education frequently failed to yield the salaried employment it promised, producing a cohort of “educated but unemployed” men whose disillusion was transmitted as a cautionary tale that depressed the ambitions of others. Salman (2023), working with Muslim youth in Delhi through a sequential mixed-methods design, deploys the concept of “frustrated freedom” to capture precisely this configuration: aspirations that are high and articulate, yet throttled by constricted opportunity structures and persistent socio-economic and political marginalisation. Basant (2012) locates a mechanism beneath the pattern, showing that the perception of unfair treatment such as discrimination in the distribution of opportunities is more acute among

Muslims than among other communities and itself shapes participation. The recurring finding across this literature is a decoupling of aspiration from attainment: ambition survives, but the conditions for its realisation do not.

3.2 *Individual and Religious Coping*

Where structures obstruct, students adapt. The foundational transactional model of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguishes problem-focused coping, which acts on the stressor itself, from emotion-focused coping, which regulates the distress the stressor provokes. Minority students in hostile educational settings characteristically combine the two, pursuing academic goals while simultaneously managing the affective toll of stigma. The international corpus on Muslim-minority students is illuminating here. Amjad (2018) found that Muslim pupils in Canadian schools navigated a marked deterioration in climate around the teaching of contentious global events, developing strategies of selective disclosure and identity management. Jilani (2015) and Abrenica (2021) similarly report that experience varies with the density of the Muslim presence in an institution, and that students actively curate their visibility in response.

A distinctive and under-theorised resource in this context is religious coping. Pargament, Koenig and Perez (2000) demonstrate that faith supplies a repertoire of coping methods, and Ano and Vasconcelles’ (2005) meta-analysis of forty-nine studies establishes that *positive* religious coping, benevolent reappraisal, collaborative reliance on the sacred and religious community support is reliably associated with better psychological adjustment to stress, while negative religious coping predicts distress. This evidence cuts directly against a strand of Indian policy discourse that treats religiosity as a drag on educational engagement; the empirical literature suggests that, mobilised positively, faith more often functions as a protective scaffold for perseverance. It is telling, however, that virtually all of this evidence derives from North American and European samples: the specific ways in which Indian Muslim students draw on prayer, congregational belonging or religious meaning-making to withstand academic and social stress remain almost entirely unmeasured, a lacuna to which this review returns. Complementary work on non-cognitive traits reinforces the point: Balani and

Bhatt (2024) find self-efficacy, perseverance and grit to be mutually reinforcing determinants of career aspiration among young adults, and argue that these capacities are cultivable through mentorship and supportive educational experience rather than fixed endowments.

3.3 Familial and Community Support

Individual coping does not occur in a vacuum; it is provisioned by family and community. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework offers the most productive lens, reframing marginalised communities not as reservoirs of deficit but as holders of under-recognised capital in six forms which are aspirational, familial, social, navigational, linguistic and resistant. The framework predicts that Muslim families transmit aspirational and resistant capital, the capacity to maintain hopes in the face of real barriers, even where they cannot supply the navigational capital that eases passage through an unfamiliar system.

This prediction maps onto the Indian first-generation-learner condition. A large share of Muslim entrants to higher education are the first in their families to arrive there, and the recurrent finding is that parents furnish abundant encouragement yet lack the procedural knowledge of entrance examinations, deadlines, scholarships and disciplinary hierarchies required to convert ambition into enrolment. The gap is not one of *wanting* but of *knowing how*. Where formal navigational capital is scarce, community institutions have historically substituted for it. Alam (2015) traces the slow emergence of a Muslim middle class partly to community networks and remittance flows, while the wider record of *waqf* and *zakat*-financed scholarships, minority-managed colleges and community study circles illustrates a self-provisioning tradition that state provision has never fully displaced. Malik (2023), examining Muslim women, documents a "double disadvantage" of religion and gender, yet the same study points to family and community sanction as decisive in whether female aspiration is licensed at all, a finding thrown into relief by the notable fact that Muslim women now outnumber Muslim men in enrolment, an inversion that community-support dynamics have yet to fully explain.

3.4 Institutional Support

The outermost circle is the institution, and here the evidence is at once thinnest and most consequential.

Two institutional settings recur, minority-managed and community institutions, of which Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University are the exemplars, offer environments in which Muslim students report a stronger sense of belonging and access to targeted supports such as residential coaching academies for competitive examinations. Mainstream campuses, by contrast, frequently leave minority students to construct belonging for themselves, and the international literature consistently associates weak institutional acknowledgement with alienation and diminished persistence.

Two mechanisms deserve particular attention. The first is the scholarship and fellowship architecture. The Post-Sachar Evaluation (Kundu, 2014) urged universities to recruit and finance Muslim students actively, and warned against the erosion of minority-specific instruments such as the Maulana Azad National Fellowship, precisely the kind of provision whose contraction the enrolment data now appear to register. The second is what Clark (1960) termed the "cooling-out" function: the quiet institutional redirection of students from ambitious to modest tracks through advising, streaming and low expectation. Though developed in another context and largely untested on Indian religious minorities, the concept supplies a testable hypothesis for why institutional neutrality may be insufficient—an institution that neither actively deflates nor actively supports aspiration may, through inertia, still cool it out. The paucity of Indian scholarship examining higher-education institutions as *actors* in aspiration formation, rather than as neutral backdrops, is among the clearest lacunae this review identifies.

IV. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Read together, the four themes expose a field organised around a productive tension. On one side sits a large, empirically grounded literature documenting structural barriers; on the other, a small and dispersed literature gesturing toward the resources that sustain aspiration despite them. The dominant register is unmistakably deficit-oriented: Muslim under-representation is most often explained by what the community is presumed to *lack*—wealth, literate parents, a valuing of education, secular schooling. The community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005)

and the religious-coping evidence (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005) together mount a serious challenge to this register, indicating that where researchers have actually looked for community and faith-based resources, they have found them in abundance. The strength of the asset-based literature is its explanatory reach; its weakness is its thinness and its heavy dependence on Western Muslim-minority samples whose transferability to India cannot be assumed.

The sharpest contradiction in the literature concerns the interpretation of the aspiration–attainment gap. High aspiration coexisting with low attainment (Jeffrey et al., 2008; Salman, 2023) admits two readings. A deficit reading treats the gap as evidence of “unrealistic” or poorly informed aspiration in need of correction. A structural reading better supported by the evidence treats it as an *opportunity* failure, in which entirely rational ambition meets a labour market and an institutional order that will not honour it. The Bijnor men were not unaspiring; they had watched education fail to pay and adjusted their expectations to a reality they read accurately. Locating the deficit in Muslim attitudes rather than in opportunity structures is not merely analytically weaker; it misdirects policy toward changing minds rather than changing conditions.

The divergent enrolment trajectories of India’s disadvantaged groups lend this structural reading further weight. Over the period in which Muslim enrolment stagnated and then fell, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe enrolment rose substantially, the salient institutional difference being the constitutional reservation that guarantees the second groups a share of seats and posts and, with it, a credible return on educational effort. The comparison functions almost as a natural experiment: where the opportunity structure is secured, aspiration converts into participation; where it is not, even robust aspiration dissipates. This does not settle the vexed policy question of extending reservation on religious lines, which raises distinct constitutional and political considerations, but it does suggest that the psychology of aspiring is powerfully conditioned by whether the pathway beyond the degree is believed to be open.

A second contradiction concerns religiosity, cast in policy discourse as an impediment to modern education yet appearing in the coping literature as a protective resource. A third concerns gender: the

“double disadvantage” thesis (Malik, 2023) sits awkwardly beside the empirical reversal in which Muslim women now out-enrol men, suggesting that the relationship between constraint and participation is more dynamic than a static disadvantage model allows. Underlying all three is a methodological weakness that qualifies the entire corpus, the frequent treatment of “Muslims” as an undifferentiated monolith. Caste, class, region and sect fracture the category profoundly; the experience of a Pasmanda first-generation learner in rural Uttar Pradesh bears little resemblance to that of an established urban household, and syntheses that flatten this heterogeneity risk obscuring the very variation that would explain who sustains aspiration and who does not.

V. RESEARCH GAPS

Four gaps follow directly from the synthesis. First, and most fundamental, there is a near-absence of India-specific empirical research on the coping and support mechanisms of Muslim students in *higher* education; the sustaining side of the ledger, richly developed for other minorities internationally, remains largely unwritten for Indian Muslims. Second, there is a geographic gap: Uttar Pradesh, which accounts for the single largest share of the recent enrolment decline and holds a Muslim population share approaching a fifth, is strikingly under-studied relative to its analytical importance. Third, an intersectional gap persists, with little work disaggregating experience by the caste, class, gender and regional cleavages that structure the community internally. Fourth, there is a methodological and instrumental gap: the field lacks aspiration and coping measures validated for the Indian Muslim context, and it is dominated by cross-sectional designs that cannot capture how aspiration is formed, sustained or eroded over time.

VI. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

These gaps chart a clear agenda. The most pressing need is for focused, mixed-methods primary research within Indian higher-education institutions, ideally state-anchored studies in high-decline settings such as Uttar Pradesh, that pair representative survey measurement of aspiration with life-history interviewing capable of recovering the texture of

coping and support. Such designs would allow the aspiration–attainment gap to be examined not as a static discrepancy but as a process. A second priority is instrument development: the construction and validation of aspiration and religious-coping scales calibrated to the linguistic and cultural specificities of the Indian Muslim student, without which cumulative measurement will remain impossible. Third, comparative designs most obviously between Dalit and Muslim students, whose divergent enrolment trajectories under differing reservation regimes constitute a natural experiment, promise unusual analytical leverage on the relationship between guaranteed opportunity and the psychology of aspiring. Finally, the field needs institutional ethnographies that treat universities as active agents in aspiration formation, and longitudinal cohorts that follow students from entry through outcome, so that the durability of aspiration and the moments of its erosion can be observed directly rather than inferred.

VII. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The synthesis carries concrete implications for institutions, policymakers and community organisations. For higher-education institutions, the evidence argues for the deliberate cultivation of belonging and the provisioning of navigational capital that first-generation Muslim students most conspicuously lack structured mentoring, orientation to examination and scholarship systems, and faculty sensitisation to the subtle dynamics of cooling-out. For policymakers, the temporal coincidence between the contraction of minority-specific scholarships and the fall in enrolment (Kundu, 2014) makes the protection and expansion of such instruments a priority, alongside strengthened coordination between education and minority-welfare departments. For community organisations, the record of *waqf*- and *zakat*-financed provision suggests that investment in navigational support such as coaching, counselling and information may yield returns disproportionate to its cost, precisely because it supplies the one form of capital that aspirational and familial capital cannot substitute for. For social work practice, the review affirms a strengths-based orientation that builds on the community's substantial cultural wealth rather than one that begins from an inventory of its deficits.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The under-representation of Muslims in Indian higher education is customarily narrated as a story of what the community lacks. This review has argued for reversing the emphasis. The available evidence on religious coping, on community cultural wealth, on the resilience of first-generation learners indicates that Muslim students and their families bring to education a substantial reservoir of aspirational, familial and resistant capital, and that ambition frequently survives conditions engineered to extinguish it. What is missing is less often found in the student than in the surrounding architecture of support: navigational knowledge, institutional acknowledgement and a stable scaffold of scholarships and mentoring. The failure that sustains under-representation is, on this reading, primarily institutional rather than communal. Sustaining aspiration therefore requires not the reform of Muslim attitudes but investment in the structures that would allow an ambition the community already possesses to be realised. Establishing this claim on firm Indian evidence particularly in Uttar Pradesh, where the stakes are highest is the task the next generation of research must take up.

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