

FROM SULTANATE PERIOD TILL DATE: AN ESTIMATE OF ROLE AND STATUS OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the evolution of Islam and advent of Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent, Muslim women have played a convincing role in shaping up the history of our country. Whether they be the erstwhile royalty or the common women, they have actively participated in the political as well as socio-cultural sphere of the country. However there have been few scholarly attempts to bring to light the concerns, trials and tribulations endured by them in this long journey, especially the common women. The Quran mentions that both men and women are equal and they both are created from nafs wahidah (a single soul). Thus, in textual Islam women have been accorded a very high status. The present paper aims to put forward socio-economic and legal standing of Muslim women within a historical framework commencing with the inception of Muslim rule in India till date besides outlining their contributions, successes and failures as also the challenges that they face.

Keywords: British Raj, Islam, Mughals, Muslim Women, Purdah, Shari'a feminism, Sultanate.

INTRODUCTION

India houses one of the largest Muslim populations in the world next only to Indonesia and Pakistan. Thus it becomes imperative to assess the condition as well as role of the women of India's largest religious minority community after six decades of independence. There has been a persistent confusion about Muslim women's status and rights. The confusion arises due to the significant differences regarding the status and rights of Muslim women in textual Islam, in Islamic history and tradition and in Islam in practice at present (Ali, 2000). Our Constitution gives equal rights to all its citizens irrespective of caste, creed, sex, language or religion. This has naturally helped Muslim women like women of other communities improve their condition after independence but still a long road lays ahead. Though Islamic feminism has not emerged in India, it is on its way (Ali, 2002)

Coming of Islam & Women during Sultanate age

Trade relations existed between Arabia and the Indian sub-continent since ancient times. Newly Islamized Arabs were Islam's first contact with India. In the 8th century, Sindh was conquered by an Arab army led by Muhammad Bin Qasim (E&D, 1871). While the 10th century witnessed Mahmud of Ghazni invading India followed by Muhammad Ghori which eventually led to the formation of the Delhi Sultanate. Muslim rule lasted for almost eight centuries, leaving an indelible impression on the history, culture, politics and administration of India. Iltutmish became the Sultan of Delhi in 1211 AD. He appointed his daughter Raziya, Sultan of Delhi, instead of his sons. *Raziya was*

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the only woman to ascend to the throne of Delhi by popular consent. Her reign and accession gains significance considering it took place in a society with rigid and fixed gender roles. She was an able ruler, although she was resented by some men. As a historian observes, 'She was endowed with all the qualities befitting a king, but she was not born of the right sex, and so, in the estimation of men, all these virtues were worthless.' (Thapar, 1966). Thus we see that India had a female ruler during the Sultanate period but it was more of an exception than usual practice. The common women remained absent from public life. This is one of the reasons for the lack of information on Muslim women's social history during this period. Another reason being the practice of purdah.

In this period, the *ulema* (Muslim theologian) interpreted Qura'nic verses and the *Shari'a*. The *ulema's* position on women was based on the orthodox Islamic tradition considering women as *fitna* (potential disorder). Accordingly; it became necessary to regulate men-women social interaction, which led to control over female sexuality, and female seclusion from public space(s). The *Ulema* also favored women's education but it was to be strictly religious (i.e. the Qur'an), furthering family values and morality among women (Kazi, 1999). For nearly two hundred years of Delhi Sultanate, condition of women remained more or less the same. In 1526 AD, the last of the Lodis were defeated in the battle of Panipat by Babur, marking the end of the Delhi Sultanate and beginning of the Mughal rule in India.

Status of Muslim Women in Mughal Period

Babur founded the Mughal dynasty in India. The real might of Mughal rule in India, spanning nearly two centuries and seven rulers, ended in 1712 AD with the death of Bahadurshah First, though the last titular Mughal emperor ruled till 1857AD. Like the Sultanate period, during this period also the absence of Muslim women from public life and the prevalence of *purdah* led to scarcity of information on Muslim women's social history. *Purdah* was a unique feature of Muslim women's lives in this time – particularly of Muslim elite, though not being followed by the working class. The ideology of *purdah* (female seclusion) came from consideration of women as *fitna*. *Purdah* later became synonymous with female 'respectability' among upper-class women (Lal, 1988). The practice of *purdah*, along with societal ideas which saw women as primarily wives and mothers, prevented female education. Thus education among Muslim women remained largely restricted to religious lore. Although *maktabs* (primary schools) had both girls and boys as students, girls were completely absent from *madarsas* (high schools/colleges). Only the affluent ones could afford private education, girls' education remained confined to memorizing the Qura'n and learning Persian or Urdu. Though many women in the Mughal royal family received private education. For example, Babar's daughter, Gulbadan Begum, wrote Humayun's biography called the *Humayun Namah* (Begum, 1988). Emperor Jahangir's wife Nur Jahan was a poetess and wrote verses under pen name 'Makhfi'. Jahanara, daughter of Shah Jahan was both a poet and a biographer. Zeb-un-Nissa, Emperor Aurangzeb's eldest daughter, was an eminent theologian and poet.

Thus it becomes clear that the period witnessed the rise of many female literary figures but one noticeable factor is the total absence of common women from this list. Not just in the literary field, even on the socio-political front, women played a prominent part though from veiled quarters (i.e. Harem). The period saw many influential women wielding great power from behind the veil. Hamida Bano Begum, Maham Anga, Bakhtunnisa, Salima Sultana, Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahan Ara, Roshan Ara, Zebunnisa, Zeenatunnisa to name just a few. Nur Jahan's (Sundaresan, 2003) name deserves special mention as she remains the only queen in the history of Muslim India, and one of the only two in the entire Muslim history, whose name was struck on the coin alongside that of the emperor. Historians have accused Nur Jahan of being cunning and power-hungry. What male historians tend to forget is that without Nur Jahan, the reign of Jahangir couldn't have lasted as long as it did (Findly, 2000). Outside the Mughal realm too we have a female hero in Chand Bibi, who defended Ahmednagar against the mighty Mughal forces of Akbar.

In actual practice, the Mughal society was essentially patriarchal where women held subordinate position to men. Men retained the right to unilateral divorce. Divorce could be given orally or in writing – without any witness. Husbands were liable to pay maintenance to the divorced wife. The practice of *khula* (a woman's right to seek divorce) was prevalent, subject to the husband's willingness to do so. Polygamy was the norm in the Mughal royalty

(Nath, 2005). Muslim women in polygamous marriages lived with their co-wives and other female relations in the royal harem, away from the public eye. Socially, condition of Muslim women was very similar to other Indian women in terms of the general lack of female education and autonomy (Lal,2005).

Condition of Muslim Women-From Coming of British upto Uprising of 1857

The loss of imperial power led to a general decline of Muslims. The demise of Persian affected women's education adversely. Within the new colonial settings, Muslims felt marginalized. However a few privileged women, educated by private tutors, were able to breach conventions though they should be seen as exceptions rather than the rule. In the absence of a male heir, Sikander Begum (1819–68), Shah Jahan Begum (1838–1901) and Sultan Jahan Begum (1858–1930) ruled the princely state of Bhopal. (Khan, 2000)

The condition of Muslim women before independence was not very different from that of women belonging to other communities. Differences were rooted in caste, class and region, rather than religion. Practice of *Purdah* was common to all communities, but varied across regions and communities. Upper class Muslim women denounced the practice of *purdah* and called for participation in the freedom struggle both before and after the uprising in 1857. Invaluable contribution Muslim ladies made to the freedom struggle hasn't been credited properly. The list of Muslim women who participated in the freedom struggle is long and not subject to any particular class only. From queens to commoners, women from all walks of life enthusiastically participated in the revolt of 1857. It is estimated that about 225 Muslim women committed their lives to the Revolt but their role in the freedom movement has not been properly acknowledged by the historians. (Barnes,2007).

Begum Hazrat Mahal, the wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, took charge of the affairs of the state, after her husband was exiled to Calcutta (Hibbert, 1980). She worked closely with other leaders of the first war of Indian independence. Bi Amma (Abadi Begum), the mother of Shoukat Ali and Mohammad Ali also played a vital role in the independence struggle. She was hailed by Mahatma Gandhi himself. Mrs. Zubaida Daoodi and Amjadi Begum played active role in the independence struggle so did Zulekha Begum (wife of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad). Sadat Bano Kichlew, wife of Dr. Saifuddin Kichlew was well versed in Urdu and Persian and compiled many patriotic poems and articles to encourage people and became chairperson of 'Swaraj Ashram'. Nishat un Nisa Begum represented Congress Subject Committee in 1921 with Begum Khursheed Khwaja. Mrs Khwaja established Hamidiya Girls Secondary School in Allahabad in 1930. Razia Khatoon was arrested and sent to Kalapani where she breathed her last. (Anjum,2011).

The history of freedom movement is replete with such incidents when Muslim women came out of their homes and took part in the struggle against the British. How can one forget Asghari Begum of Thana Bhawan, Muzaffarnagar, who bravely fought against the British and was burnt alive when defeated. Similar were the heroics of Habiba and Rahimi (Muzaffarnagar) who obstructed the advance of English forces, were caught and hanged. Zehida Khatoon Sherwani, wrote patriotic poems to encourage freedom fighters. Muneera Begum, Amina Qureshi, Fatima Qureshi, Amina Tyabji (wife of Abbas Tyabji), Rehana Tyabji (daughter of Abbas Tyabji), Begum Sakina Luqmani (daughter of Badruddin Taybji) and many others participated in the freedom struggle and made rich contribution in various ways. Some of them were imprisoned, fined and suffered for freedom movement and made undeniable contribution to the freedom struggle.

Status and Role of Muslim Women (1857-1947)

Even after the failure of the Revolt of 1857, the Muslim women were part of the freedom movement in one way or the other. This period also marked the growth of modern thinking and western education which in turn led to social reform and women's rights movements in Indian society. In the Islamic context, modernists argued for reform in Muslim law, and a greater public role for Muslim women based on the principle of equal rights.

One peculiar feature of early 20th century was the emergence of Islamist view of women. It placed women strictly within the home, endorsed *purdah* and idealized domesticity. Despite societal pressures and prevailing orthodoxy, Muslim women at the start of the twentieth century successfully emerged from the isolation of traditional roles to claim a greater role in public affairs. In 1906, a separate school for girls called '*Purdahnashin Madarsa*' was

founded by Sheikh Abdullah and his wife Wahid Jahan Begum, the Begum of Bhopal also founded a girls' school in 1914. Thus opening up doors of education for women. (Lateef, 1990)

The women's movement teamed up with the nationalist leadership to attain pro-women legislation. In 1937, the *Shariat Act* was passed by the central legislature. The main aim of this Act was to secure uniformity of laws for all Muslims in British India. A little later the *Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Bill* (1939) was passed; it specified the grounds under which a Muslim woman was entitled to obtain a decree for the dissolution of her marriage. Both the bills generated public awareness for women's issues.

Although one big limitation of the women's movement was that its leadership remained restricted to upper class women (Caton, 1930). The early twentieth century also witnessed the establishment of 'purdah clubs' across India. Thus providing common platform to Muslim women to share their views which was previously not possible for them because of their confinement at home.

The period witnessed many strong and vocal female voices. The Begum of Bhopal, one of the pioneers of women's education was against the *purdah*. In 1929, she publicly removed her veil while presiding over the session of the All India Women's Conference. Thus, making a strong statement against it. In the 1946 elections, Begum Shahnawaz and Begum Shaista Ikramullah were elected to the Central Constituent Assembly.

Success of the women's movement in bringing about social and legal reform led to the demand for the enfranchisement of Indian women. By 1921, it became possible for women to be elected to central and state legislatures. An important feature of women's movement at this time was Hindu-Muslim unity. Begum Shahnawaz appealed to Hindu and Muslim women to work together for the benefit of all Indian women and opposed the idea of separate electorates based on communal lines. (Shahnawaz, 2002)

Although orthodox ideas dominated among the Muslims, liberal voices were also there in the form of two movements viz. the Aligarh and the Ahmadiya movements. Both positively effected slow but steady emancipation of Muslim women (Ghadially, 1989). Women also organized various Muslim Women's Organisation in different parts of the country called Anjuma-e-Khawateen-e-Islam. The All India Muslim Ladies Conference was founded in Lahore in 1907. Women participated actively in movements like Anjuman Khwateen-e-Islam, Haqooq-e-Niswan, Rahbar-e-Niswaan and the Khilafat movement.

Status of Muslim women in India-1947 till date

With the partition of India in 1947 and exit of the Muslim League from the socio-political scene of the country, the political influence of the *ulema* and other conservatives increased. In the absence of a national or visionary leadership, the cause of Muslim women was taken up mostly by conservative Muslims claiming to represent the community.

While civil and criminal laws in post-independent India are secular, personal laws (i.e. laws covering family relations, marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody rights, etc.) fall in the domain of religious law. Accordingly, Muslim women came under the purview of Muslim Personal (Family) Law. In the recent times, we have seen keen debate being undertaken about Islam and women's rights. The roots of such discourse can be traced back to the time of its evolution. Muslim jurists compiled the Islamic law or the *Shari'a* during the ninth and the tenth centuries well after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. While the basis of the *Shari'a* is the Qura'n, believed to be the word of God; over a long period of time it has also been subject to human reasoning and interpretation. Four different schools of Islamic law originated due to interpretational differences among the Islamic jurists viz., Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki and Hanbali. (Gillaume, 1990)

All laws are unanimous on the fundamental dogmas, but differ on their interpretation. Jurisprudential difference among the followers of different schools of law has led to differing legal positions for women. (Mernissi, 1987). The variety of interpretations show that the *Shari'a* has been subject to human reasoning and interpretation at different historical periods, as per the political, social, economic and cultural conditions of the place in question (Hughes, 1988). Thus it becomes imperative to relook at the many century-old laws with a contemporary perspective as they can't be expected to work in the twenty-first century without modification when social, political and cultural conditions

differ considerably from those of seventh century Arabia.

India consists of one of the largest Muslim populations in the world next only to Indonesia and Pakistan. Thus the improvement in Muslim women's condition will positively affect overall condition of women in general and of the society at large. Education could be a handy weapon to eradicate economic misery of the Muslim women because financial dependency on their male relations is the main reason for their low status. After independence, women's education made considerable progress in India. The number of girl's schools and colleges increased. As a result, today Muslim women are seen coming out of their *purdah* and sharing greater responsibilities in national reconstruction.

There are socio-economic reasons for comparative backwardness of Muslim women. Mostly, Muslims are artisans and self-employed thus with a limited knowledge of the world around them. Then, we have those Muslims who live in villages and work as agricultural labourers and follow other such pursuits. They are found to be even more conservative. These sections of society do not know what is written in Qur'an or hadith, much less what are problems with hadith or different schools of law but at the same time we have positive signs also with an educated middle class emerging among Indian Muslims- though still short in numbers – which understands the need of changing times and wants to keep pace with it.

Islamic feminism has not come to India yet. Slowly it is gaining currency. Some Muslim women NGOs have come together and formed Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Morcha. Another healthy change is that the parents' attitude towards girl's education has changed significantly during the last two decades. They are not as hostile to it as earlier they used to be. Today the Muslim community can boast of many women achievers from different walks of life who have carved a niche for themselves in the so called men's world. Some of them can be listed: Najma Shaikh, Prof. Sakina Hasan, Begum Akhtar, Shabana Azmi, Ismat Chughtai, Kurtul-en-Haider, Najama Heptulla, Mohasina Kidwai, Justice Fatima Bibi, Shahnaz Hussain, Nafeesa Ali, Farah Khan, Zoya Akhtar, Sania Mirza etc. This is not an exhaustive list by any standards. Today Muslim women are trying to come out of conservatism by getting themselves educated, participating in societal tasks, earning through occupying gainful employment and thus becoming self-reliant (Menon, 1981)

CONCLUSION

The main concern of pre-independence women's movements was to eradicate illiteracy and to bring Muslim women out of the four walls of their house thus making them a direct participant of the freedom struggle. The women were yet to question the male hegemony and their subservient status to men. While the post- independence women's movement stressed on gender equality and highlighted the oppressive nature of the existing patriarchal structure.

In more than six decades of India's independence, the condition of women in the country and Muslim women in particular has registered improvement. Yet it's only the beginning of a long journey. Education especially Qur'anic literacy for the women and by the women is an urgent need of the hour. It is for Islamic feminist to revisit Qur'an and reinterpret it in appropriate context of women's rights.

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