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Position of Women in Muslim Society through the Ages

Dr. Chhawang Subba
Assistant Professor,
Department of History,
University of Gour Banga, Malda,

Abstract:

The women in Muslim society were subject to subjugation and deprivation since the earliest of ages. The orthodox Islamic traditions and its interpretation by the religious class of Muslim society never let the women to come out from the four walls of their houses. There were times when some learned people of the society tried to emancipate women from this situation but with little success. More or less the deplorable and dominated position of the women folk in Muslim society remained the same. From the time of Muhammad to the colonial period, this paper deals with the challenges and the real position of the Bengali Muslim women.

Keywords: Muslim women, society, orthodoxy, subjugation, emancipation,

The best way to measure the progress of a community in a society is to find out the status of its women. The all round progress or development of any nation or state is not possible without considering its women regardless of their cast, colour and creed as they stand for about half of the population. The position of women in a society is the true indicator of its cultural and spiritual attainments. If we want to study the position of women in any society we must study the complexity of roles which women perform in the socio-economic, cultural, religious and political arena. Muslim women have suffering from both internal and external oppression, not only Muslim but also women of all religions have been facing problem of social conservatism as they are weaker sex in society. The only difference is that, among the other religions of India this unexpected situation is fast changing, but situation is not so positive as far as Muslim women are concerned.

Islamic law is primarily based on the teachings of the Quran and the traditions known as Hadith, of Prophet Muhammad that lay down the guidelines for a conduct of a Muslim's life. The interpretations of these teachings and traditions are varied and this variation has given rise to several schools and sub-schools of thought. Despite some codification, most of the Muslim laws are uncoded and are being followed in its crude form since ages.

Traditionally, the Muslim women were subordinated to men and secluded from the outside world which reduces their importance as individuals. They were from the very beginning, victims of the socio-religious and cultural constraints and were placed at a very disadvantaged position. Like the women of other countries of the Muslim world, the position of the Bengali Muslim women was deplorable and sub-standard. To better understand the actual position and status in Bengal society of the Muslim women, it is pertinent to look into the position of Muslim women in other Islamic countries. Throughout the Muslim world, for thousands of years, women were kept into total subjugation by the patriarchal Muslim society.

Muslim personal law prescribes different rules for men and women in society. On the brighter side, Muslim law provides a certain degree of autonomy to women on matters of marriage. Marriage is considered a civil contract wherein the wife can stipulate her demands in the contract and her consent is also final. She has a right to dower or *Mahr*. But the things that nullify all the rights given are polygamy and certain laws on divorce. Polygamy as well as polyandry was universal and divorce was easy. Women had no recognized place in the Muslim society and birth of a girl child was highly unwanted event. A girl was forced to be married at an early age of 7 or 8. Women at that time had no property rights, since they themselves were looked down upon as property.

With the advent of Prophet Mohammad, the position of women considerably improved. The holy Quran considers both men and women as having originated from one living being and they enjoy the same status. The Prophet appealed his followers not to be harsh to their wives and daughters. The women were given the right to hold property in their own right. The women would benefit from their own earnings and would be masters of their own earning. The prophet improved the status of women by restricting polygamy to four wives, by prohibiting female infanticide, by declaring Mehr (dower) as a gift to the bride and by modifying the Arab law of marriage and divorce in favour of women.

Though Islam has not given men and women equal status, it treats women with respect and honour. Many Arab women became the head of the state and others wielded great political power in Muslim world. They showed their excellence in theology and religion. We hardly find any sphere in Islam in which women of the Prophet's time did not participated. Islam also advocated for the education of women. Many women contributed greatly to literature.

The status of women again began to deteriorate after the death of the Great Prophet. The Muslim women who enjoyed certain rights and dignity during the time of the Prophet faced an adverse situation under the influence of Ulemas, theologians and jurists. With the expansion of Islam in many countries, the Islamic frontier greatly expanded, but the status and position of Muslim women remained unchanged.

After the advent of Islam in India, the orthodox Muslim jurists and theologians misinterpreted the Quran and imposed certain restrictions on the womenfolk. Thus, patriarchal values and patriarchal structure undermined the position of women in the Indian Muslim society. The custom of purdah made the Muslim women hardly face the outside world and made them more secluded. When the Muslim conquerors established their rule all over India, they found that the position of women in Hindu society, more or less, similar to their own, and as a result, they were even willing to borrow some of those elements from Hindu society as well. Thus, child marriage, dowry system, arbitrary divorce, polygamy, strict purdah system widely prevailed in the society. Women in general, both Hindus and Muslims were pushed back to the isolated, cursed *Zenana Mahal* or *Andarmahal* and were deprived of any kind of freedom, enlightenment or education, social and legal rights. However, the upper strata of society had always enjoyed certain limited advantages in the field of education during that period. But they had not any personal freedom or scope to develop their individuality.

When the British established their hegemony in India, generally they decided not to disturb the social and religious matrix of Indian people. As a result of this, the condition of women remained the same as earlier-degraded. In Bengal, Muslim women lived in a society which was decidedly less advanced than the Hindus in all respect of live and culture. Bengal was the region where the Muslim population was highest in India. The majority of the Muslims lived in rural areas and was dependent on agriculture. The large number of Muslim population was majorly due to the conversion of the low caste Hindus to Islam. In the pre-Plassey period, the Muslims occupied suitable position in the administration, trade and commerce. But after the Plassey, they largely lost their earlier position and became a backward community. The ignorance in acceptance of the modern and western education made the matter worse. Their Hindu counterparts whole heartedly welcomed and embraced the opportunity provided by the western education by getting suitable jobs in administrative departments, thereby improving their status and life-style in the society. This made the Muslims in Bengal even backward.

The Maulavi-Mullah and Ulema influenced Muslim society was backward in the field of education. During the late nineteenth century, although the population of Muslims in Bengal was almost half of the total, but only 5 per cent of the college students were Muslims with no single Muslim girl. The *Ashraf- Atrap* division of Muslim society in Bengal did no good to the condition of the Muslims. The upper class Ashraf, who were descendents of Arabia and Persia and proud of their ancestry, never treated Atrap or lower class Muslims as their own and always maintained distance with them.

In the traditional Bengali Muslim society, women were a victim of the religious and cultural constrained. They were denied all opportunities for developing and unfolding their personalities. They were regarded primarily to play the role of a docile daughter, or compliant wife and dependent mother. For the majority of Muslim women, home was their only world. She would spend most of her time looking after her family and children. The role of women in society was still defined largely by their functions as wife and mother. Although Islam theoretically approved the equality of sexes, it has given a superior position to men in the family and society.

The most disgraceful custom that prevailed in the Muslim society was 'Purdah', a socio-cultural obstacle standing in the way of Muslim women's development. The Bengali Muslim women living in the nuclear and joint, patriarchal family, both in rural and urban areas spent their lives in the inner compartment of the home and they were expected to cover their faces in front of men who were not the members of their family. Elite Muslim women were more severely restricted by the code of purdah. Muslim girls were often obliged to maintain purdah even before marriage. In the lower strata of Muslim society, the custom could not be observed strictly as they had to engage in various economic activities. For the elite section, purdah had become a hallmark of respect and importance. Even the learned Muslim elite like Abdul Luteef, Maulavi Abdul Hakim, Nawab Syed Mahmud advocated for the purdah system and did not allowed their daughters to attend school or college. Some learned and liberal Muslims though admitted that 'Purdah' was an essential Islamic social practice but its strict restrictions as prevalent, were greatly regretted by them considering it contrary to the status and dignity of women in society.

With regard to the education, the Muslim women in Bengal were very backward. The society was not in favour of women education. In 1900, there was not a single Muslim girl among the 294 women attending colleges in India. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, the pioneer of Muslim modernization in India, was not in favour of women education. In the traditional society of Bengal, Muslim women in their childhood used to learn 'Namaz' and Quran from the Maulavis and took lessons on Arabic, Persian and Urdu from lady tutors at home, thus not affecting purdah. Besides Calcutta Madrasa (1781), a large number of Madrasas and Maktabas were established in both rural and urban areas, but the girls rarely got themselves admitted there as co-

education was strongly condemned by the Muslim society. Formal education did not prosper among the Bengali Muslim women. An Education Report of 1881-82 reveals that there was not a single Muslim student in English High School having 184 girls. In the Middle High School there were only 4 Muslim girls out of 340 students in Bengal.

Emancipation of women is regarded as a very significant factor which affects the socio-economic development of a community. The role of Muslim literati for the improvement of the condition of the Muslim women in society is very significant one. The thought process of the literati which was reflected in the form of their speeches, writings and activities through their association and institutions designed to create a public opinion in favour of the improved condition of women could be noticed from the third quarter of the nineteenth century onwards. Women took on leadership roles and became articulate in expressing their views about how their roles should be expanded and their status in society be improved.

Unlike among the Hindus, marriage among the Bengal Muslims was a contract and not a sacrament. With the onset of puberty, a girl was considered physically and mentally ready for marriage. Marriages generally were arranged by guardians. Child marriages were widely practiced. Polygamy or plurality of wives was a common feature in both the Muslims and Hindu communities in Bengal. According to Quranic Law, a man can marry up to four women on the condition that he will treat all of them equally. In the traditional Muslim society of Bengal, widow remarriage was considered to be a shameful and disgraceful act. But the Prophet encouraged widow remarriage and he himself married several widows and divorcees for the social upliftment. According to Quranic Law, it is responsibility of a widow's parents to remarry her, just like her daughter, but in practice it was not done.

Though the Prophet had given unlimited freedom to the man, he was not allowed free divorce. The pronouncement of *Talaq* was considered to be the most detestable of all permitted things before the God. The Holy Quran made it obligatory for the Muslim men to make provisions for divorcees. Despite all these, arbitrary divorce was widely practiced in Bengal.

About the property rights, Islam says "to the male the equivalent of the portion of two females". Though Islam has not given women equal share in the matter of property inheritance, according to Islamic Law, the women possesses absolute right over the property which she owns and she can dispose of it according to her will. But there were plenty of examples where women were deprived of their right to property inheritance. Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain was thrown out of her house after the death of her husband.

Conclusion

Judging the status of women from the Muslim personal law perspective, we can find on the one hand, the literal interpretation of Sharia law that considers women as a legal entity with equal rights as that of men; and on the other hand, the orthodox and parochial interpretation, the one endorsed by many Muslim countries around the world which does not permit women to get education or work and wear veil always when in public. Therefore, Bengali Muslim women, in the traditional Bengali Muslim society, were the victims of the age old bondage and are segregated from the outside world. The Quranic injunctions and Fatwas imposed on them by the orthodox Mollas, Maulavis and Maulanas prevented women from attending any school outside their home. The colonial rule in India did not help much to the development of Muslim womens' condition. The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of darkness, gloom and despair of the Muslims of Bengal along with the Muslims of the whole Indian sub-continent. With the advent of modernization in the Muslim society from the late nineteenth century, Muslim women began to be involved in greater spheres of activity. The birth of Muslim enlightened class in Bengal tried to give a new life to the society by their liberal and

rational thoughts, side by side with the orthodox and conservative forces. It was within this process of transformation that Muslim women lived through the ages.

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