

Interrogating Psycho-Social Problems of Muslim Women

The Indian Experience

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Abstract

The present paper is an endeavour to examine and emphasize the issues of psycho-social circumstances of Indian Muslim women in sociological perspective with special indication to their socio-economic, employment, educational attainment, rights and privileges, hindrances and restrictions, role and status as well as their multifarious problems from socio-religious stance at empirical context. Emphasis is also given to recognize their social position in textual and contextual spheres i.e., Islam and Muslim society.

The facts and findings presented in this research paper are based on both the secondary sources and primary sources of data. Various relevant in print research references are consulted besides authors' empirical observations on the community concerned at the micro as well as macro level to produce this paper. The abovementioned issues are empirically examined and discussed based on data available and collected and put the facts alongside in an organized manner.

Keywords: Islam, Muslim society, women, affliction, privileges, restrictions.

Introduction

The all-round development of a nation largely depends upon strapping up the skilfulness and abilities of all segments of society regardless of of caste, class, colour, creed and of course sexual category. On the other hand women discriminated against for ages and also have been suffering from given unequal treatment in connection with prospects, privileges, rights and status in numerous socio-economic and cultural spheres in the society. Devoid of concerning women in the programmes and performances of development, not simply obstruct their own development, social change and mobility towards social progress but also have an effect on the development of the entire nation (Azim 1997, 11). The concern of women's studies, having its fundamental objective to accumulate information on women and to explore their social position as well as problems and prospects, is attaining a great deal of magnitude during recent times in social scientific research and discourse. The ultimate objective of this sort of study is to empower the women in their movement for liberation and struggle in opposition to inequity. Again despite the fact that owing to divergence in culture and tradition, the status of women differs from society to society. In this regard women's studies have also an immense importance in generating awareness about the multi-dimensional roles played by the women and their diverse social position in diverse societies from an empirical point of view. Taking into consideration the theoretical and methodological outlooks of the studies of women, the subject is prevalently designated as gender studies instead of women's studies in contemporary time. Gender is a socially constructed roles, responsibilities and relations which are assigned to both men and women in the society creating inequities among them and the key subject matter of

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gender studies is to present a comparative outlook of social situation, in a given society, between women and men (Mondal, 2005, 1).

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a Bengali social reformer of India, stressed out the value of civil liberties and individual human rights in his critique of the inferior position of Hindu women. In addition to this, he further anxiously stressed the need to eradicate the exercises of the malevolent customs and traditions such as polygamy, female infanticide, and *sati* rampant in the Hindu society in that time. In the year 1875 when the Arya Samaj established, it spotlighted on restructuring alongside the lines of idolatry, caste, polygamy and widows' seclusion. Moreover, it absolutely concentrated on itself to Hindu women belonging to middle-class where the aforesaid customs were limited to an undersized segment of society. Consequently, it efficiently marginalized the concerns of poor women including Muslim women (Kazi, 1999, 7). The commonly widespread conception of Muslim women indicates that in comparison to the women of other religious communities, Muslim women enjoy the least status in every sphere of social life. Owing to which they have not been allowed to take part in many walks of life pushed into stereotype roles of looking after domestic tasks which weakens the capabilities and capacities and so on of the Muslim women by their men. Inequitable conduct is controlled to them at home making them drop out of the school so that the Muslim women may execute the scheduled chores of a concierge (Azim, 1997, 12).

The Concepts and Concerns

Exceeded merely by Indonesia's and close to the Muslim populations of Pakistan and Bangladesh, Muslims of India is amongst the largest in the world. Besides, the Indian Muslims are larger than the total populations of most nations of the globe. In India Muslims comprise the second largest religious group and thus the largest religious minority population of the country. India's Muslims at over 138 million and would be over 150 million by 2006 as the 2001 census report enumerated. India is well thought-out an overpopulated nation and its population policy seek out to attain substitute level fertility by the year 2010. Hitherto, in India, implementation of the population policy has come under rigorous attack, more so owing to the element of compulsion intrinsic in the endorsement and reception of modern contraceptives. Furthermore, the population policy of India does not sufficiently identify the multi-dimensionality of the socio-economic forces that prevail upon the domestic decisions vis-à-vis the families' size. Instantly, remarkable and reliable social safety nets in place to protect the interests of the poor and sick are lacking, and consequently, old age safety still dominates fertility decisions, while the average family or household size has reduced in due course. The population programme is over dependent on female sterilization with minute or no alternative based access to a basket of family constraint measures and there is minute acknowledgment of the reality that in due course it is development and equity that empowers people to build well-versed choices regarding the formation of family. The impact of education with particular reference to women education has shown leading influence not only in reducing fertility but also in the decrease of infant and child mortality, birth weights enhancement and on the whole human development incidentally (GOI, 2006, 27).

Muslims in India are the largest minority so far as the minorities of this country are concerned and the majority of this largest minority community is awfully to the rear in respect of education and economy where more or less all other minorities are more affluent. Moreover Muslims disappointingly have not been capable to find their due share in the entire welfare effort made by the Govt. in the country since independence for economically weaker sections of the society. To find out the causes of such backwardness of Muslims, various Governments, time to time, appointed committees among which the latest one is the Sachar Committee which has conspicuously exposed that the Muslims of India are the most educationally and economically backward minority within whom merely four per cent population is educated (Ahmad, 2012, 09). The accessible rough, statistical, and micro level studies on Muslim women restate that the mass of the Muslim women, at the present time, are most deprived, economically impoverished, and politically marginalized sections of the Indian society. Further the studies disclose that Muslim women, like other women, are not homogeneous rather they are differentiated along the fault-lines of community, class, caste and region. Their lives are similarly positioned at

the crossroads of family, gender and community within the dynamic context of Indian society, economy and polity (Hasan and Menon, 2004, 3).

Position of Women in Islam

The rights and responsibilities of a woman are, however, equal to those of the men but they are not necessarily alike with them. To think that woman is less significant than man just because of her roles, status, and rights which are not identically the same as man is unjustified rather Islam gives the women equal rights, acknowledges and recognises her independent personality literally and women status in Islam is something novel and something distinct and something unique. Although Islam confesses the equality of men and women, yet inequalities between them are very ample in many areas in practice. Once more owing to various historical and socio-cultural reasons, their conditions are also something different from the ideal norms (Mondal, 1994, 167-168). Kazi (1999, 31) states, *“In a context where the Shari’a is used to justify women’s subordination, it is necessary for Muslim women in India to enter the discourse on the Shari’a with reference to personal law, and challenge their historic marginalization from religious knowledge.”* Islam, with respect to the status of women in the society, has not only given women the rights and privileges but also has a very clear notion and the attitude of the *Quran* and the *Hadith* bear witness to the fact that women is, at least, as vital to the life and society as man himself, and is not inferior to him at all (Mondal, 2005, 18). Mondal, (2005, 34-35) points out, *“The Quran repeatedly expresses the need for treating men and women with equality. The contribution of women is acknowledged in the history of Islam. It is now argued that women’s place in the religion of Islam has been suppressed by the conservative and fundamentalist forces. Women’s passivity, seclusion, and marginal position that noticed in Muslim society have little to do with Islamic ideology, but are, on the contrary patriarchal ideological construct that can be considered alien to Islam and the effect of exploitation of power by the authoritative and reactionary forces in the Muslim society. The Muslim women have been given some rights and privileges in the Quran and Hadith. But the question is how far these are effective in practices of the Muslim Society? Therefore, to understand their real position we are in need of knowing the dialectics between Islamic ideology and the situation of Muslim women as well as the relation between them.”*

An Enquiry into their Contemporary Social Situation

Every concern of the socio-economic circumstances of the Muslim minority in India needs to imply that different issues faced by the Muslims are multilateral as they at the meantime face problems pertaining to security, justice, identity and equity like all other minorities of the country and the relations of these proportions is at the axis of the socio-economic and political processes that the community is revealed to on a daily base. Because of unavailability of relevant ‘hard and unbiased’ data, an empirical searching of these multifaceted problems is typically worried and such information constraints are of course more precise for security and identity-related apprehension (Besant and Shariff, 2010, 2). Two major problems in the field of education and employment which are crucial for the socio-economic development of any individual are facing by the Muslims in India. It is evident that, in terms of quantitative and qualitative education, Muslims in India as well as Muslims in West Bengal are lagging behind and is also depressing. Condition of Muslim women education is lower than their counterpart men. The key reasons among other causes for educational backwardness of the Muslims are their underprivileged economic situation, absent of adequate number of Government and Government aided schools in Muslim concentrated areas and lack of job opportunities among the educated Muslims. Muslim women are lagging behind in education probably as a consequence of socio-cultural pattern of the family and the society, the pessimistic outlook towards the education of girls and are lack of infrastructures for education in Muslim concentrated neighbourhoods. Muslims have limited access to in the distance school (Rahaman and Bhuiamali, 2011, 84 & 91).

Over the last two decades the situation of Muslim women mostly their social situation have come to the notice of the academicians, policy makers and development authorities of India and it has been considered that the Muslim women are the most underprivileged segment of India’s population. They take part in a crucial role in well being and especially survival of the families, yet, sorry to say, for various reasons the gender inequality is

greatly prominent in Muslim society. Moreover their marginalized status is not well documented although information on Muslim women particularly their social position, problems and prospects is very necessary for the sake of their empowerment concern which is a priority area of countrywide development (Mondal, 2005, 1-2). Mahmood (2001: 13-14) states: “*The societal pluralism of India, as fortified by the unique Constitutional concept of secularism, raises the need for the protection and development of all sorts of weaker sections of the Indian citizenry-whether this “weakness” is based on numbers or on the social, economic or educational status of any particular group. The Constitution, therefore, speaks of Religious and Linguistic Minorities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes and makes- or leaves room for making-for them special provisions of various natures and varying import.*” Women in Muslim communities face extensive challenges on the completion of five decades of India’s independence as citizens of India and as members of India’s largest and principal minority population of India. Their meagre socio-economic situation exposes a lack of social prospect which, nonetheless not an attribute limited to Muslim women, is upset by their negligible position within an overall context of social disadvantage for most of the women in Indian society. Muslim women in India, so far various Government reports are concerned, are amongst the poorest, economically vulnerable, educationally disenfranchised, politically marginalized group. Furthermore, huge loophole in information on Muslim women contributes to the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes, serving to mask their life experiences and struggles. Consequently, the perception that the Muslim women social status in India attains solely from Muslim personal laws or their status is attributable to certain intrinsic, unchangeable or binding ‘Islamic’ characteristics is extensively widespread (Kazi, 1999, 31).

Socio-Economic Status

The social organizations and economic situations of Indian Muslims differ from region to region and within a region from one social group to another being a plural community. On the other hand, as a religious or minority community they are found most backward and poor at national level according to the report of Governmental agencies and individual researchers. Again great numbers of Indian Muslims, both in rural and urban areas, are either unemployed or subsisted on manual low paid occupations in spite of the constitutional guarantees of equality and social justice and socio-economic and educational development in the nation (Waheed, 2006, 169). Muslim women have the smallest amount of work participation rate (WPR) with a huge gap between the WPRs for Muslim women and Hindu women or Christian women among all three categories of work. Muslim women in self-employed are 60% and the employment rate as regular workers in urban areas are 15.7 % for Muslim women as compared to 27.7 % for Hindu women and 51.5 % for Christian women and in rural regions there is also a more or less similar employment status for Hindu and Muslim women comprising 3.6 % and 3 % respectively. These statistics underline the marginal presence of Muslim women in salaried jobs. Muslim women’s marginal presence as workers in the formal economy is pointed out through their high self-employment rates and the following low involvement in salaried job indicating their invisibility as informal employees. Again it is very difficult to pinpoint specific roots behind their skimpy employment position owing to lack of existing research and analysis in the sphere of employment of Muslim women while their educational status most apparently exercise a noteworthy pressure in both urban and rural areas on the type and ranks of their employment (Kazi, 1999, 24-25).

Largely Worker population ratios / rates or WPRs give an idea of the extent of participation in economic activity by a specific population. Since pointed out that the ability to find work is a function of assets, both physical and others, and opportunities of work offered. Also persons principally women belonging to healthy endowed households as large landowners, as because there is no persuasive economic want to do so may perhaps not take part in the workforce. Again given the endowments if the work available is not of the type of a person prefers, he individual may possibly not work. A multiplicity of factors is responsible behind these work preferences like the role of socio-economic and cultural. Besides, non-availability of employment may result in situations that people particularly women depart from the labour force. Consequently, differences in WPRs reflect the differences in endowment as well as the nature and quantum of service prospects and these complex links are

difficult to disentangle frequently (GOI, 2006, 89). In India, on the whole, about 44 per cent of women in the key age group of 15–64 years partake in the workforce whereas in case of men about 85 per cent do the same. On the other hand, the workforce participation rate (WPR) among Muslim women is only about 25 per cent on an average. In rural areas, whereas about 70 per cent of the Hindu women take part in the workforce in case of Muslim women only about 29 per cent perform so. The Hindu women from upper castes in rural areas even have a higher participation rate resembling 43 per cent. The fact partly explains regarding the lower participation of Muslim women in rural areas is that the Muslim family circles (and thus women) are fewer likely to be engaged in agricultural pursuits. The WPRs for Muslim women in urban areas are even as lower as it stands for 18 per cent, most probably, for the reason that work opportunities inside the household for women are very limited which may be rather higher in rural areas with ownership, however limited, of land making partaking of Muslim women in these areas rather higher (GOI, 2006, 90).

One of the key determinants of an individual social status is her or his employment which is a social inevitability and a basis of self-esteem though it is an economic activity. To take part in the developmental activities of a country employment presents landscapes to both men and women. Likewise the productive people can contribute their mite to the income of a nation whereas the unproductive people for the most part depend on others. Hence it is very depressing to note in this context that though in the development process a great proportion of women are able to contribute their mite, they are being considered as unproductive because of the notion which is broadly prevalent that the role of women should be limited in the household and the expectation for women that they will happen to just good housewives and good mothers. But as because no development is achievable ignoring and bypassing near about half of the entire human population, of course the women, it is essential to note that the participation in and access to social and economic activities of women is indispensable for both their own development and for the development of the nation (Azim, 1997, 89).

Educational Status

Under the Ministry of Education of the Govt. of India the education commission in 1966 stated that the responsibility of the educational system is to convey various social groups and classes simultaneously to support the manifestation of an egalitarian and integrated society. Yet, the development of education in India is unfortunately very inadequate while different efforts have been taken in post-independent India to spread education amongst its citizens, the outcome is very unpleasing with special reference to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward communities, minorities or weaker sections of Indian society (Mondal, 1997, 19). So far the status of education of the Muslim women is concerned it is still the most unpleasant besides the cultural traditions which act as catastrophe limiting Muslim girls from obtaining the benefit of co-educational schools, mainly if they are remote away from their homes. To get better Muslim female education facilitating higher participation of girls in school education, some key measures like opening of separate girls' schools and girls' hostels, appointment of lady teachers and launch of special scholarship schemes if implemented sincerely may attract more Muslim girls to attain education (Alam, 2012, 29).

The Muslim Backwardness is well recorded which is substantiated by common place observation as well as Government statistics and reports. The facets of backwardness are diverse in nature in the sphere of common information at present. There is consent on remedial measures too and it is now well recognized that education is the core and long term way out to deal with diverse facet of backwardness in detail (Talib, 2012, 103). There is no uncertainty that they are educationally backward and have low work participation rate so far the situation of Muslim women is concerned. However, this reality cannot be understood in a limited way and for which there is need taking on a broader socio-economic, political and programmatic attitude along with the existing heterogeneity in terms of class, region, sect, and gender and by adopting such outlook it would be possible to set up the actual reason behind Muslim women's meagre educational level particularly in higher and job oriented education and also to establish required interferences regarding both at the community level and at the policy or programmatic phase (Hussain, 2010, 53). In Sachar Committee Report (2006, 85), headed by Justice Rajinder

Sachar, pointed out that: “*There is also a common belief that Muslim parents feel that education is not important for girls and that it may instil a wrong set of values. Even if girls are enrolled, they are withdrawn at an early age to marry them off. This leads to a higher drop-out rate among Muslim girls. Our interactions indicate that the problem may lie in non-availability of schools within easy reach for girls at lower levels of education, absence of girl’s hostels, absence of female teachers and availability of scholarships as they move up the education ladder.*” While the enrolment rates have risen significantly at the primary level but many students who register drop out and consequently very scanty of them manage to get beyond the primary stage. Inequality and differences between communities is one additional critical aspect of this broader incident of disparity in India. It is well known that the Muslims literacy and educational levels is beneath the national average whereas the census reports of India remain silent on Muslims educational status. Moreover, gender inequality is one key feature of educational disparity in the sphere of education (Hasan and Menon, 2004, 47)

Conclusion

Although without considering the religion endorsed status of the women, it is not a simple task to clarify as well as comprehend the position of women in every religion including women in Islam. So far Islam and Muslim society are concerned the position of women is somewhat unique and also controversial as the privileges and priorities sanctioned for women in the holy books like the holy Quran and the *Hadith* are exceptionally significant and high on the other hand it is currently squabbled that this remarkable and respectful social position of women in Islam has been concealed by the fundamentalist and conservative forces. Owing to which, seclusion, marginality, tradition boundness, passivity, low aspiration, lack of self reliant and so on which have retarded their normal progress and social change are vastly observed among the women in Muslim society. By evaluating the overall facts and findings, it can be concluded that the situation of Muslim women is not satisfactory especially regarding their socio-economic status, educational attainment, political participation, role in decision-making etc. Their status, unequal to men, in the society is very much conspicuous in terms of gender based division of labour. In decision-making process the Muslim women in the society have nothing or minimal say while counterpart men have the key role in decision-making power both inside and outside the household besides their domination in public and community affairs.

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