



## MUSLIM WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: CHANGING FAMILIES STRUCTURE AND GENDER ROLES

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*“O people Be conscious of your Lord, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand (your rights) from one another, and these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you.”(4:1).*

### **Abstract:**

Women are as essential as men for the continuation of human life and development of society. Any discrimination based on gender is a grave offense. Islam considers it a sin against the Creator and Lawgiver who made men and women equal participants in the human species. Islam does not consider women a mere shadow or an extension of a man, always following him. She has her full individual freedom and responsibility to the belief in the message of God and in practicing its obligations. The family is the first and essential area in which women's rights have to be secured. Marriage and parenthood are among the basic objectives of the Islamic legal system (maqasid al-shari'a). Jurists consider marriage and formation of a family closer to the essence of religion which is “worshipping God” (Ibada), than to a human worldly dealing (muamala). Islam secures the right of women from the moment the baby girl is born. She should be received with happiness and pleasure, in contrast with the Arab tribal and combatant society that used to determine individuals' place in the society on the basis of their ability to fight.

India is today one of the most powerful developing nations. This newly industrializing state enjoys a prominent status as the largest democratic nation-state in the world. In spite of her impressive developments, however, India continues to confront human rights problems with respect to minorities.

The present paper is an endeavor 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.

**Keywords: Muslim Women, Contemporary India, Changing Families Structure and Gender Roles.**

### **Introduction:**

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.

### **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 recognizes 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 *Hadish* 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.”*

#### **Rights of Muslim Women:**

Muslim women lives in abject poverty and misery and all she wants is a dignified way of life. She wants education, livelihood and dignity. She does not want charity nor does she want doles from the state. It is a tragedy that nobody wants to talk about the concerns of Muslim women. Especially the Muslim religious bodies do not want to even hear about it. Muslim women are taking leadership not only to change her-self but to change the entire community and society. Muslim women have become conscious of herself as a citizen of this country. And she finds no contradiction between being a Muslim and being an Indian citizen. She wants to assert her identity as Indian Muslim women.

Today Muslim women are asking the reasons behind the sheer poverty of the community. She is seeking accountability from the state and from the community. Poverty of the Muslim community is a result of a long process of neglect and the process of marginalization and deprivation needs to be analyzed. The community must generate the demand for change and reforms.

**Some very specific suggestions:**

- It is very frustrating to see that people who are in power do not carry out their responsibilities.
- It is not very easy when one is working for change from within the system.
- The struggle of Muslim women is a struggle for development and the strategies should be worked out accordingly.
- Muslim women must link the issue of oral divorce with the issues of development.
- They must also work to increase their credibility so that they are acknowledged by the state structures.
- The NGOs must help the beneficiaries with all the paperwork.
- The political participation of Muslim women must increase.
- Muslim women must initiate dialogue with secular parliamentarians.
- The issue of oral divorce should be put before the National Commission for Minorities. The NCW can also be involved.
- It is better to talk about problems first rather than the solution which is codification of Muslim law.
- The Commissions must also be empowered beyond their powers of recommendation
- Site best practices of other states as far as scholarship schemes are concerned.
- We must talk about the economic inclusion of Muslim women.

**Islam, Muslim and Women:**

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, 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.

The Arabic word “awliya” that is used in the Quran to show the mutual rights and obligations of women in the society, underlines both the ‘responsibility’ and the ‘authority’ that men and women should equally share as inseparable members of the society in which all individuals and groups whatever the differences among them may be, have collective responsibility toward the society as a whole. Enjoining the doing of what is right and forbidding the doing of what is wrong “al-amr bilma’ruf wal-naby’an al’munkar” cover all the social and political activities\_which are acknowledged now as human rights, and should be secured for both men and women equally in the society. During the rule of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (634-644), a Muslim woman expressed publicly her opposition to the Caliph’s suggestion of restricting the amount that a woman can ask for as a dowry, and the Caliph had to withdraw his suggestions.

#### **The Holy Qur’an’s Emphasis Of Equality :**

Since the creation of first man and woman, they were equal in their responsibilities. According to the Quran, Eve was as responsible as Adam in relation to the divine obligations, and had equal responsibility and free will as Adam in following Satan’s temptation, as it has been previously mentioned. The Quran strongly emphasizes this equal responsibility of men and women:

**“Verily, for all men and women who have submitted themselves unto God, and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word,.....for (all of) them has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward. And whenever God and His Apostle have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in this matter.” (33:35, 36).**

The creator of men and women is not being biased in His reward to any of them for the fulfillment of one’s responsibility:

**“So their Lord responded to them: I shall never waste the work of any worker among you, be it man or woman: each of you is equal to the other in origin and status.”(3:195).**

#### **Muslim Women and Society:**

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 meager 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 instill 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).

Islam secures women's rights in education and work. The Prophet responded positively and instantly to woman asking him to appoint a certain time to teach the Islam regularly. Some women reported the Prophet's traditions (rawiyat al'hadith). The historian Ibn Sa'd (d.835) compiled the biographies of more than 700 women who reported the Prophet's traditions. The male colleagues of these female scholars accepted and respected them as al-Dhahabi (d. 1347) pointed out in his distinguished work on hadith reporting.

Muslim women also made their contributions in various fields, such as: literature, arts and artistic crafts (e.g. fashion, decorated textiles and rugs, cuisine, perfumes, hair-dress, etc.), and Sufism (e.g. famous poet Al-Khansa in early Islam, famous Sufi Rabi'a d. 801). As early as the time of the Prophet, they accompanied men in the battlefield, where they treated

the wounded, and participated sometimes in fighting the enemy when this became necessary. In Muslim Spain “Andalus”, several women were famous as physicians in various specializations, including optometry and surgery.

**Conclusion:**

The distressing picture of men-woman relations in contemporary Muslim societies, which contradicts the teaching of Islam, is a concrete fact that cannot be denied. However, another positive fact that exists side by side, is that an awareness of the essential and constructive role of women in the society to fulfill their Islamic responsibilities, is increasingly appreciated among Muslim men and women. The divine guidance in the Quran and Sunna, and many positives in our intellectual and practical heritage, have increasingly inspired and generated new works that advocate the rights of Muslim women in the name of God and His message.

Day after day, Muslim are becoming more and more aware of the due distinction between the permanent teachings of the divine sources of Islam and the accumulated human ideas and practices that were influenced by the cultural and social circumstances in the Muslim societies, in the past and the present. Conceptual and behavioral progress is apparent now in

Muslim societies, which seems more keen to observe the divine teachings and abandon the human deviated customs in man-woman relations in the family and the society. Women’s education and work in different fields have developed their personality, self-confidence and initiatives. An awareness of their Islamic rights and responsibilities has inspired many of them to be committed to the Islamic message of justice, peace and prosperity. These concrete developments have provided a support for the Muslim woman, stronger than any philosophical or legal argument. On the other hand, Muslim men have realized the social change and have become more inclined to deal with it. Muslims cannot reactivate their societies, secure a positive role in the contemporary world and get their message heard by all people, while a half of their population is suppressed or neglected. How can Muslims call universally for a divine justice, while they are missing or ignoring it among themselves, their homes and their communities?

Progress can be obviously noticed... and hopefully it will continue and accelerate, benefiting Muslims in the first place, and then representing the message of Islam to the whole world appealingly.

As I mentioned in my Title *Changing Families Structure And Gender Roles*, above said some examples are directly or indirectly approaches the intention of author, even though overall concern in the name of religion irrespective of any, women exploiting in many cases.

In Kannada daily paper called *VIJAYAVANI* of 14.02.2016, Sunday's article Banuvarada Focus Story was published, in that Kashmir Mahileralli Parivarthana Parva (Revolutionary Change in Kashmir Women-Specially Muslim Women) written that women are more aware about education. So, they are coming out from their village and staying in cities and giving education to their childrens. In the male dominated society women digesting everything silently in Kashmir, but now they are coming out and fighting for Rights and Equality.

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