

MUSLIM WOMEN MINORITY OF WEST BENGAL: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THEIR ROLE AND STATUS

Intekhab Hossain and Syed Abul Hafiz Moinuddin

Women studies have a great value in examining their diverse social situation as well as facet of multi-dimensional roles played in different societies and in generating awareness regarding various natures of problem faced by them in a tradition bound multi-cultural society like India. Due to differences in culture and tradition, the status of women differs from society to society across the world. This is an important area of enquiry in social science research which is gaining impetus in recent times globally. The main objective of such kind of study is to empower women in their movement for liberation, their struggle against inequality and to attain due recognition on par with men.

The proposed research paper is a modest effort to examine and explore the position and role of Muslim women in society as well as their problems and prospects from socio-religious point of view in India generally and West Bengal in particular. To understand the level of inclusion and empowerment of Muslim women, an attempt has been given to approach the status of education, economy, occupational pursuits, fundamental rights, political participation and the like.

The present paper is based on secondary sources as well as primary sources of data. Numerous relevant published and un-published literatures were consulted besides the authors' empirical observations on the Muslim communities of West Bengal at the micro as well as macro level to prepare this paper.

Introduction

In traditional Bengal women in Muslim society used to live in a much closed social environment and were mostly confined to homes observing many social restrictions with regards to the pattern of behaviour and activities. They observed strict seclusion or the system of *parda* suffering from several social disabilities. In the society unilateral form of divorce and polygyny were prevalent and the girls were predominantly married at a very premature age immediately after puberty. In the sphere of educational attainment of the Muslim girls, it had been a severe problem in the nineteenth century. The economic roles of the Muslim women were very unimportant in nature and they mostly engaged in household workings and child rearing. They used to keep ducks, fowls, cows and goats in the households. A few of them were also engaged in certain craft works. The Muslim women were ignorant, illiterate and confined in their homes mostly living in isolation due to strict rules of *parda* or seclusion. Due to various reasons viz., routine of excessive work, avoidance, neglect, mental torture and separation or divorce even in casual

Address for communication: **Md. Intekhab Hossain**, Dept. of Sociology, Aliah University, Kolkata and **Professor Syed Abul Hafiz Moinuddin**, Head Dept. of Sociology, Vidyasagar University, Midnapore (W), West Bengal, India

matters, the position of Muslim women in the society was exploitative in nature instead of equality and justice. The birth of a girl child in the family was looked upon as a very unfortunate and unpleasant incident and females were not allowed to convey their opinion in matters of family and other social dealings. However, the system of dowry was prevalent but not as high and compulsive as at present. Widow Remarriage was allowed and practised. Regardless of Islamic dictation of women's share in parental property, they were deprived of getting their respective shares for various reasons. Owing to ignorance and segregation women had very little social contact with the outside world and they were also not accounted with their fundamental and legal rights (Mondal, 1994, p. 168). Okon (2013, p. 27) opines:

It is time for men to accept the plain truth that humankind consists of two sexes, which are equal, and at the same time different with infinite and unique diversity. A unilateral and sexually undifferentiated definition of what the world and humankind should be, without identifying the peculiar problems and needs of women is clearly an epistemic and logical error that should be corrected in the 21st century. Islam has done much to liberate women from cultural and traditional inhibitions. The *ulama* should move fast to change the attitude of Muslims toward women. If Islam will lead other world religions (including Christianity), in working toward total freedom for womanhood, then there is need to invest in women. It is recommended that women education in Islamic countries should be free from primary school to university.

The situation of Muslim women mainly their social situation have come to the notice of the academicians, policy makers and development authorities of India over the last two decades and it has been considered that the Muslim women are the most deprived segment of the country's population. They play a vital role in well being and very survival of the Muslim families. Nevertheless, unfortunately, for various reasons the gender disparity is very much prominent in Muslim society and also the marginalized status of Muslim women is not well documented. Owing to which information on Muslim women with special reference to their social position, problems and prospects is very necessary for the sake of their empowerment issue which is a priority area of national progress (Mondal, 2005, pp. 1-2.). Kazi (1999, p. 31) points out:

The lack of social opportunities for Muslim women is a crucial issue needing urgent action. An improvement in literacy rates would directly influence Muslim women's socio-economic and political status as citizens of India. The acknowledgement of the universality of women's rights by the international community is relevant to the debate on Islam and women's rights, particularly with reference to women's rights in the family.

Women studies have a great value in examining their diverse social situation as well as facet of multi-dimensional roles played in different societies and in generating awareness regarding various natures of problem faced by them in a tradition bound multi-cultural society like India. Due to differences in culture and

tradition, the status of women differs from society to society across the world. This is an important area of enquiry in social science research which is gaining impetus in recent times globally. The main objective of such kind of study is to empower women in their movement for liberation, their struggle against inequality and to attain due recognition on par with men.

Minority and the Constitution of India

Abraham (2009) states, "A minority is a group of people subjected to prejudice and discrimination in a given society. Sociologically speaking, minority groups are not necessarily numerically small groups; they are simply victims of differential and unequal treatment" (p. 135). In Oxford Dictionary of Sociology as pointed out by Scott and Marshall (2009, p. 476):

Since the 1930s this term has been applied to social groups that are oppressed or stigmatized on the basis of racial, ethnic, biological, or other characteristics. Louis Writh, for example, defines a minority group as 'a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination'. However, seen in these terms, a minority group could in fact constitute a numerical majority in any society-for example Blacks in South Africa. It might be more useful, therefore, to distinguish between groups which are actually a minority in numbers and those which are marginal in terms their access to power.

The all-round development of a country depends upon harnessing the skills and abilities of all sections of society despite of caste, class, colour, creed and of course sex. Nevertheless women discriminated against for ages and also have been suffering from given unequal treatment with regards to opportunities, rights and status in many socio-economic and cultural spheres. Without involving women in development programmes and activities, not simply impede their own development, social change and mobility towards upliftment in social ladder but also affects the development of the whole country (Azim, 1997, p. 11). Mahmood (2001) 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" (pp. 13-14). India is a "secular", "democratic" and "republic" nation by its Constitution providing recognition to all professed religions Indian citizens and group identities as such. The socio-economic and political justice; liberty of thought, expression, faith, belief, and worship; equal status and opportunity to each and every citizen of the nation and seeks to endorse fraternity among the citizens of India with the

intention of promise the unity of the nation and the individuals' dignity which the India Constitution gives assurance to all the citizens of India subcontinent (Mondal, 1992, p. 157). Taking reference from the Constitution of India, Mondal (1992, p. 157) has pointed out:

Part III of the Constitution deals with the Fundamental Rights and gives assurance to all citizens of India that no discrimination will be permitted on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article-15). This acquires significance in the case of Muslims on the ground of their position as a religious or cultural minority in India. The Constitution also assures equality of opportunity to all in the matters of employment under government (Article-16). It gives freedom of speech, expression, residence, acquisition and disposal of property, practice of profession, free association and free movement (Article-19), gives the right of freedom of religion (Article-25), protects the cultural and educational rights of the minorities (Article-29). All these provisions also acquire significance when applied to the Muslim community, who constitutes one of the important cultural minorities of the country.

Every Muslim citizen of India is individually a member of a distinct religious community, which together with other religious communities constitute the Indian nation. Therefore every Muslim citizen of this country individually and Muslims as a whole collectively are the part of Indian nation.

Gender Justice and Parity in Islam

Although the rights and responsibilities of a woman are equal to those of the men but they are not necessarily identical with them. To think that woman is less important than man just because of her roles, status, and rights which are not identically the same as man is baseless. Islam gives the women equal rights, acknowledges her and recognises her independent personality factually and women status in Islam is something unique, something novel and something distinct. Although Islam confesses the equality of men and women, yet inequalities between them are very wide in many areas in practice. Again due to various historical and socio-cultural reasons, their conditions are also something different from the ideal norms (Mondal, 1994, pp. 167-168). In response to the rights and privileges of Women in the *Quran* and *Hadith*, Mondal (2005, pp. 34-35) states:

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.

Kazi (1999) 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" (p. 31). In respect of the status of women in the society Islam has not only given women the privileges 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 at all inferior to him (Mondal, 2005, p. 18).

Obscurity of the Muslim Women

Due to immense historical, social and cultural diversities among Muslim communities all over, the problems faced by them are also not the same and as a consequence there are socio-economic and political challenges and impediments. Besides, the communities have been undoubtedly facing severe issues in contemporary India and more so for the reason that they are wrongly portrayed as a monolithic and homogeneous group while the reality is that Islam and Muslims are not monolithic, rather the living Islam has great multiplicity and heterogeneity (Hossain, 2013, 279). The obtainable uneven, statistical, and micro studies on Muslim women restate that the bulk amongst them are most underprivileged, economically impoverished, and politically marginalized segments of Indian society at the present time. The studies further reveal that Muslim women are not uniform differentiated along the fault-lines of class, caste, community and region like other women. The lives of them are equally placed at the crossroads of family, gender and community inside the dynamic context of Indian society, polity and economy (Hasan and Menon, 2004, p. 3). Sachar Committee Report (2006, pp. 12-13), headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar, states:

Many suggested that gender issues in the Community are also given a Muslim slant. To the exclusion of all other aspects of a Muslim woman's life (income, jobs, education, security and even caloric intake), the rules of marriage, right to divorce and maintenance have become the benchmarks of a gender-just existence. The obsessive focus on select cases of Muslim women passionately discussed in the media results in identifying the Muslim religion as the sole locus of gender injustice in the Community. Consequently, the civil society and the State locate Muslim women's deprivation not in terms of the 'objective' reality of societal discrimination and faulty development policies, but in the religious-community space. This allows the State to shift the blame to the Community and to absolve itself of neglect.

As the Muslims are influenced by both the Islamic as well as regional and local traditions, the socio-cultural life of the Muslims exhibits unique features owing to living in different parts and corners of the nation. While the Muslims are the members of Islamic community (*Umma*) out of universal devotion and belief, it is not unease of day by day realistic life where they interrelate with the local cultures, hence, curiosity arises in numerous quarters to know the nature and

moral fibre of the community concerned with particular reference to their society and culture.

A considerable Muslims reside in West Bengal adhering to the fundamental values of Islam and meanwhile share the local traditions i.e. the Bengali culture common to both Hindus and Muslims of the state without any inconsistency between the two spheres even though both the limitations are sharply defined by the respective beliefs and practices (Mondal, 2006, p. 281). Since the Bengal Muslims previously remains unexplored we do not have very adequate information and consciousness about their society with particular reference to the situation of Muslim women in comparison to the women in other religious groups due to lack of concentration and motivation of the social scientists including sociologists and social anthropologists, academicians, scholars, researchers, social activists, planners and policy makers and the others who have not paid their much attention to explore the social matrix and cultural dynamics of the Muslims of this Indian state as it deserves. (Hossain, 2012, p. 14).

Social and Economic Drawback

In India every consideration of the socio-economic situation of the Muslim minority needs to make out that various issues faced by the Muslims are many-sided as they at the same time face problems relating to identity, security, justice and equity like all other minorities of the country and the interaction of these dimensions is at the centre of the socio-economic-political processes that the community is uncovered to on a daily base. Due to non-availability of pertinent 'hard and unbiased' data, an empirical searching of these multifaceted problems is typically troubled and such information constraints are naturally further rigorous for security and identity-related concern (Besant and Shariff, 2010, p. 2). As citizens of India and as members of India's largest and principal minority population of India, women in Muslim communities face substantial challenges on the completion of five decades of independence. The poor socio-economic situation of Muslim women reveals a lack of social prospect which, nevertheless not a characteristic restricted to Muslim women, is aggravated by their minor position inside an overall context of social drawback for most of the women in Indian society.

Muslim women in India are amongst the poorest, economically vulnerable, educationally disenfranchised, politically marginalized group so far various Government reports are concerned. Moreover, immense lacuna in information on Muslim women contributes to the strengthening of cultural stereotypes, serving to disguise their life experiences and struggles. Subsequently, the perception that the social status of the Muslim women in India obtains solely from Muslim personal laws or their status is attributable to certain inherent, unchangeable or binding 'Islamic' characteristics is extensively prevalent (Kazi, 1999, p. 31). Muslims in West Bengal constitute 16,075,836 individuals or 25.20 % of the total population

of the state where 84.26% of the Muslims live in rural areas and 15.74 % in urban areas and the rate of illiteracy among Muslim women in the state is 61.07% compared to 47.04% among Hindu women According to 2001 census.

According to the report of National Family Health Survey 1992-93, in the age group of 13-49 years only 1.4% of Muslim women have read up to high school standard, whereas 6.9% of non-Muslim women are in the category. In the post-high school education, the percentage of Muslim women was stated to be 0.5 whereas that of non-Muslim women is 4.6 and the ratios of Muslim and non-Muslim in the categories are 1:7 and 1:9 (Siddiqui, 2011 p. 213). One of the key determinants of social status of an individual is her or his employment which is a social inevitability and a basis of self respect though it is an economic activity. To take part in the developmental activities of a nation employment presents landscapes to both men and women. Moreover the Productive people can contribute their mite to the income of a nation while the unproductive people mostly depend on others. Therefore it is very disheartening to note in this context that although 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 widely prevalent that the role of women should be confined 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 i. e. the women, it is important to note that the participation in and access to social and economic activities of women is essential for both their own development and for the development of the country (Azim, 1997, p. 89). Muslim women have the least work participation rate (WPR) with a large 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 neighbourhoods 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 an approximately analogous employment status for Hindu and Muslim women comprising 3.6% and 3% respectively. These figures emphasize the marginal presence of Muslim women in salaried jobs. Muslim women marginal presence as workers in the formal economy is pointed out through their high self-employment rates and the subsequent low participation in salaried job indicating their invisibility as casual employees.

Again it is very complicated to pinpoint specific roots behind their meagre employment status due to lack of existing research and analysis in the sphere employment of Muslim women while their educational status must apparently exercise a significant pressure in both urban and rural areas on the type and ranks of their employment (Kazi, 1999, pp. 24-25). Mostly the rural Muslims of this state are agriculturalists, unemployed and under-employed and suffer from terribly

inadequate educational amenities in the area and to the coverage they are available are away from easy contact of overwhelmingly their big figure on account of the expenditure concerned (Siddiqui, 2011, pp. 213 & 214).

Setback in Educational Attainment

In 1966 the education commission under the Ministry of Education of the Govt. of India stated that the responsibility of the educational system is to convey diverse social groups and classes simultaneously to endorse the materialization of an egalitarian and integrated society.

However, disappointingly, the development of education in India is very meagre. Although different efforts have been taken after independence in India to spread education amongst the citizens, the outcome is very unpleasing with particular reference to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward communities, minorities or weaker sections of Indian society (Mondal, 1997, p. 19). In case of Muslim women, there is no uncertainty that they are educationally backward and have low work participation rate. Yet, this reality cannot be understood in a limited way and for which there is necessitate taking on a broader socio-economic, political and programmatic outlook along with the existing heterogeneity in terms of region, sect, class and gender and by adopting such outlook it would be possible to set up the actual reason behind Muslim women's lesser 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 stage (Hussain, 2010, p. 53). The Muslim Backwardness is well recorded validated by universal place watching as well as Government statistics and various reports. The facets of backwardness are diverse in nature in the sphere of common information at present. There is consent on corrective measures too and it is now well recognized that education is the centre and long term way out to deal with diverse facet of backwardness in detail (Talib, 2012, p. 103). So far the educational status of the Muslim women is concerned it is still the most unpleasant besides the cultural traditions which act as catastrophe restraining Muslim girls from obtaining the benefit of co-educational schools, mainly if they are remote away from their homes. To improve Muslim female education facilitating higher participation of girls in school education, some key measures like opening of separate girls' schools and girls' hostels, engagement of lady teachers and introduction of special scholarship schemes if implemented sincerely may attract more Muslim girls to attain education (Alam, 2012: 29). Although the Enrolment rates have risen considerably at the primary level but many students who register drop out and as a result very meagre of them manage to get beyond the primary phase. In India inequity and differences between communities is one additional critical aspect of this broader occurrence of disparity. It is well known that the Muslims literacy and educational levels is underneath the national average while

the census reports of India remain unspoken on Muslims educational standing. In the sphere of education Gender inequality is one key feature of educational disparity (Hasan and Menon, 2004, p. 47). However, the women educational drawback in Muslim communities in India commands consideration, the Govt. of India has failed to secure education at primary and secondary level for most of its citizens rather the Govt. policies have deprived people of their educational right. Again so far Muslim girls schooling is concerned, it could be assumed that it is not always encouraged. An upgrading in the literacy rates for Muslims on the whole would lead to a subsequent increase in their enrolment in universities and professional courses and make certain more social prospect for Muslim women and men. Muslim women's meagre rate of literacy totally prevents their possibility of entering in higher education institutions because of this preliminary weakness. Owing to which two institutions viz., Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University had been established with the definite endeavour of promoting Muslims (male and female) educational status in India in spite of the fact that these are incapable to comprise a preponderance of students from Indian Muslim communities in their professional disciplines (Kazi, 1999, p. 26).

Conclusion

The preceding discussions reveal the situation of women in Muslim communities which is very pitiful and is of inferior quality than women in other socio-religious groups. Their unfortunate socio-economic situation reflects that they still remains deprived, educationally unauthorised, politically marginalized, have no or less significant say in decision making process, lack of control over resources and have very limited participation in economic activities. Owing to which they do not have much higher social status in the society and lack social opportunity. They use to suffer from fear psychosis, inferiority complex, low level of aspiration and frustration. All these features, since time immemorial, collectively has kept them immobilized, tradition bound and retarded from the normal progress in society as they are socialised since childhood in such a way to conduct and proceed according to the desire of the patriarchal authoritarian social system of Muslim society rather than their own determination, will and hope. These circumstances, as a matter of fact, have developed very poor self image among them in spite of the fact, which we cannot ignore, i. e. their key role in family organization and preservation of culture and heritage.

Status of women in Islam and Muslim society is to some extent unique and in the interim controversial since the privileges and precedence endorsed for women in the holy Quran and the *Hadith* are remarkably momentous and high whereas it is, on the other hand, presently argued that such position of women in Islam has been veiled by the fundamentalist and conservative forces. Therefore, without taking into consideration the religion sanctioned position of the women in their respective

religion, it is very difficult to elucidate and also realize the actual situation of women in all religion and including Islam.

Moreover, the problems faced by the women in Bengal Muslim society is of complex nature as the causes are deeply rooted into historical, cultural, situational and an amalgamation of all these three contributing factors because of which there is no specific reason behind their problems, discrimination, unequal status and treatment in the given society. What needs to be done is more empirical research which is essentially required to understand the multifaceted strange troubles at the wider level. Due to lack of such empirical studies, the insight and information on Muslim women perpetuates to the fortification of cultural stereotypes i.e. a widely prevalent notion that the status of Muslim women is characterised by certain fundamental and binding Islamic precepts and norms or originates absolutely from Muslim personal laws. These ideas contribute to disguise their life experiences and efforts for liberation and empowerment.

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