

**Mahmudul Hasan Laskar and Ruma Deb Nath**

## **ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN MUSLIM SOCIETY: A STUDY AMONG MUSLIM WOMEN OF GUWAHATI**

### ***Abstract***

*The status of women in Muslim society is determined by Islam as a religion, patriarchal interpretation of holy texts (Quran and Hadith) and socio-cultural practices of a particular society. Islam as a religion stands for equality of men and women but patriarchal interpretations of its holy texts have undermined women's role in the realms of economy, polity, education and culture. Muslim women sociologists and social scientists such as Asma Barlas (2000, 2006); Badran Margot (1995); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (1998); Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998); Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1999); Valentine M. Moghadam (1993) have developed 'Islamic Feminism' as a theoretical approach to examine the status of women in Islam and various Muslim societies of the world. They have challenged the patriarchal and misogynistic readings of the sacred texts of Islam. The present paper has examined how Islamic feminism as a sociological approach can develop social or ideological movement for gender equality and empowerment of women in Muslim society. The study has also focused on consciousness regarding Islamic feminism among working Muslim women in Guwahati city. All are not aware of it, so it is examined how far Islamic feminism is able to develop self-awakening among Muslim working women. Working women in this paper refers to those who are engaged in professional sectors like academic and corporate.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Islamic feminism, Gender, Muslim society, Muslim women*

### **Introduction**

The interrelationship between Islam and the status of women is debatable. In Muslim society, the status of women is not just determined by Islam as a religion but rather by the social construction of gender in various Muslim societies across the world. Islam has ensured an egalitarian society and equality of men and women. However socio-cultural practices and

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**MAHMUDUL HASAN LASKAR**, Research Scholar, Dept. of Sociology, Assam University, Silchar, Email: hasanlaskaramu@gmail.com; **RUMA DEB NATH**, Assistant Prof. Dept. of Sociology, Assam University, Silchar, Email: rumadebnath.au@gmail.com

patriarchal interpretation of holy texts (Quran and Hadith) are mainly responsible for gender inequality and the low status of women in Muslim society. A section of scholars believes that re-reading or reinterpretation of sacred texts is essential for developing a progressive Muslim society, where women enjoy liberty and freedom. Other sections of scholars believe that modernization in line with developed Western society is the only way to reconstruct a liberal Muslim society and empower Muslim women. The first category of scholars is mainly propagating Islamic feminism as a new approach to Muslim women's self-awakening and empowerment. 'Islamic feminism' is different from secular Western feminism in the sense that it tries to locate the status of women provided by the Quran and Hadith and opposes the conservative and patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts. Islamic feminism applies the hermeneutic philosophy of interpretive sociology in order to understand the underlying narrative of gender inequality in Muslim society. It has attempted to understand how patriarchal interpretations of holy texts determined gender construction in Muslim society. So, Islamic feminism called for an egalitarian interpretation of holy texts and Islamic laws.

Indian Muslim women are most vulnerable in terms of economic participation, educational identity, social status and religious identity. Muslim women's workforce participation and education are very poor. Prominent issues of Indian Muslim women are low educational attainment, dropout of Muslim girls, low workforce participation, particularly in professional sectors, isolation of Muslim women in domestic life and absence of women in social and religious (such as Muslim Personal Law Board etc.) organizations. Muslim women's practice of *Purdah* (seclusion) is a major issue not because of specific dressing patterns but because of its implications. *Purdah* does not only mean hijab or dressing in a particular way rather it implies social isolation or seclusion from public spheres of life. Thus, this notion of *purdah* automatically drives Muslim women into domestic life.

### **Theoretical framework**

Islamic feminism is a new theoretical approach developed by Muslim women sociologists and social scientists to challenge the patriarchal interpretations of holy texts such as the *Quran* and *Hadith*. It aims to re-establish the *Quranic* egalitarian society by developing progressive ideas of gender and women's status. Arab, Asian, Middle Eastern and European Muslim women scholars (Asma Barlas, 2000, 2006; Badran Margot, 1995; Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, 1998; Afsaneh Najmabadi, 1998; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 1999; and Valentine M. Moghadam, 1993) popularized the idea of 'Islamic Feminism'. They challenged the patriarchal and misogynistic readings and interpretation of the sacred scripture (*Quran and Hadith*) of Islam. For them, 'Islamic feminism' can highlight issues, which are different from secular western feminism. Islamic feminism tries to re-examine the status of women stated in the *Quran* and

*Hadith*, and opposes the conservative patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts. Sylvia Vatuk (2008); Nadja-Christina Schneider (2009) and some other Indian women scholars examined the relevance of 'Islamic feminism' in India and the patriarchal domination imposed by the All India Muslim Personal Law Board.

The paradox of conservative and progressive views on Muslim women's status in India is reflected in the narrative of popular Muslim scholars. Islamic scholars like Shah Waliullah stated that due to the reluctant exercise of *Shariah* law (Islamic law) and the Un-Islamic code of life were the prime reasons for the decline of Muslim rule in India. He was in favour of conservative Muslim society, which for him was Islamic reform. A modern scholar Sir Syed Ahmad Khan expressed concern for backwardness in Muslim society and he advocated for secularizing education and secular political participation without contradicting basic Islamic principles. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was an ardent propagator of modern Islam and promoted girls' education (Shahida Lateef (1983). In the contemporary context, we see the idea of Islamic feminism is yet to develop or mature. In India, Islamic feminism as a new idea is still limited to specific Muslim women scholars. Common Muslim women are unaware of it. It has a great prospect of bringing change in the approach to women empowerment in Muslim society. In this context, the paper has set the objectives of examining how Islamic feminism can be used as an approach to women's empowerment in Indian Muslim society; and to examine the consciousness regarding Islamic feminism among working Muslim women in Guwahati.

### **Methods and techniques**

The study has been carried out by using a qualitative research method like ethnography. Techniques used for collecting data are unstructured interviews and participant observation. Five (5) male members of *Tabligh* have been interviewed to examine the contradiction between Islamic feminism and *Tabligh*. Five working (teacher) Muslim women have been interviewed to examine the role of Western feminism in the empowerment of Muslim women. Another five working Muslim women (organizational professionals) have been interviewed to examine the consciousness regarding Islamic feminism among them and how far it has affected their status. An empirical study has been conducted in the Guwahati city of Assam, India. The focus group of the population is Muslim working women in the city.

### **Who are Muslim women in the study**

Muslim women as a gender category often face discrimination and inequality in Muslim society. They also form a lower class because of their low economic participation. Women in an affluent Muslim group may not be economically empowered. So, Muslim women must be studied as an

independent class category within Muslim society. They also form a subordinate gender category in the patriarchal Muslim society. However, Muslim women in India are not a homogenous group but rather a very diverse category. The social, economic, religious and cultural diversity of Muslim communities in India has determined variation in women's status. Muslim women's status further varies from rural to urban society and homogenous to multi-cultural society. Irshad Ali (1978) stated that Assamese Muslim society is similar to Assamese Hindu society in terms of culture and traditions. They are an integral part of mainstream Assamese society and culture. Assamese Muslim society is liberal and progressive in terms of women's socio-economic status. In the present study, working Assamese Muslim women of Guwahati are chosen. Working Muslim women are referred to as those who are working in formal organizations and institutions. For the purpose of the interview, Muslim women working in the University, colleges and corporate organizations have been chosen.

### **Results and Discussion**

Islamic feminism as a sociological perspective is able to develop ideological movement among Muslim women scholars in Europe, West and Middle Eastern countries. Its acceptance and practice are yet to develop on a full scale in Indian Muslim society. The idea of Islamic feminism has gained popularity in Indian academics in recent times. Common Muslim women are unaware of it. It has been revealed that there are three dimensions of Muslim women empowerment: religious empowerment through *Tabligh* movement (advocated by conservative clerics), modernization of Muslim women through Western feminism and socio-economic empowerment through Islamic feminism. Detailed discussion is done in the following sections.

### **Islamic Feminism as a Sociological Approach**

Asma Barlas (2000, 2006); Badran Margot (1995); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (1998); Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998); Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1999); Valentine M. Moghadam (1993) and other Muslim scholars of Arab, Middle East and Europe used the term 'Islamic Feminism' to examine the status of women in Islam and various Muslim society. It has challenged the patriarchal and misogynistic readings of the sacred scripture of Islam. 'Islamic feminism' is different from secular Western feminism in the sense that it tries to locate the status of women provided by the *Quran* and *Hadith* and opposes the patriarchal and conservative interpretations of sacred texts. Asma Barlas (2002, 2001 & 2006), a leading Islamic scholar, popularized the approach of Islamic feminism to understand the patriarchal reading of sacred texts of Islam. She highlighted the question does Quran advocates gender differentiation and inequality based on sexual (biological) differences. Asma (2002) has revealed through her interpretive methodological study that the Quran's epistemology is inherently anti-patriarchal. She argued that conservative and male-dominated

interpretations of the *Quran* and *Hadith* have led to gender inequality and exploitation of women in Muslim society. Badran Margot (1995) and Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2003 & 1999) are also prominent Muslim scholars who challenged patriarchal domination and advocated for the emancipation of women from isolation. It has also been uncovered by many Muslim scholars that polygamy and *purdah* are two constraining forces in Muslim society that signify patriarchal domination and discrimination of women in Islamic traditions. Islamic tradition redefined polygamy as marriage with four women at a time. It changed the pre-Islamic tradition of marriage with unlimited women in Arab society. Progressive Muslim scholars are concerned about male domination in marriage and using women as mere subjects. Anitta Kynsilehto (2008) applied 'Islamic Feminism' to examine the issue of women's rights in both Muslim-majority nations and societies where Muslims are a minority. She questioned the conservative narrative on women's position in Muslim society. She argued for challenging patriarchal readings of the *Quran* and the *Hadith* because male-dominated schools of thought promote patriarchal traditions in Muslim society. *Quran* contains principles of gender equality and wider issues of social justice, so it is the basis of challenging patriarchal traditions. Islamic feminism is useful as a descriptive and analytical tool to unmask the principles of gender equality from the confines of patriarchal traditions. Asma Barlas (2001) stated that Muslims are now living in numerous political, social and cultural conditions and even in religious diversity across the world. So Muslim women have different kinds of concerns depending on the social, political and cultural conditions they live. Though diverse condition causes different situations, women face almost similar forms of sexual inequality and discrimination in all societies. Muslim women are facing different kinds of discrimination such as bigotry, domestic violence, legal refusal to recognize their inheritance rights as equal to men and restriction or denial of political-economic rights. Asma Barlas (2001) argued that Islam is presented as patriarchal and oppressive because there are errors in the interpretation of its holy texts. She further argued that the *Quran* can be read as an anti-patriarchal text. Asma Barlas (2002) raised the question of whether father/male rule is divinely given rule in the world that patriarchy usually believes. Asma further highlighted the question of whether does *Quran* advocates gender differentiation and inequality based on sexual (biological) differences of the human being. She argued that gender inequality and sexual oppression of women in Muslim society are because of reasons like misreading of *Quran* and entrusting interpretation of the *Quran* to only clerics. Asma Barlas (2001) acknowledged the importance of Western feminism but also admitted that she doesn't agree with the Western narrative of women's 'liberation'. Asma (2002) argued that the liberation of Muslim women lies in the *Quran* itself. She also highlighted the fact that inequality and discrimination derive not from the teachings of the *Quran* but from the secondary religious texts, the *Tafsir* (*Quranic exegesis*) and the *Ahadith* (*hadith*) (narratives purportedly detailing the life and praxis of the

Prophet Muhammad). Badran Margot (1995) highlighted the emergence of Islamic feminism in Egyptian society. Consciousness among Egyptian Muslim women regarding their subordination emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Margot pointed out that women's question against male domination has been termed as feminism in Egypt. Egyptian Muslim and Christian women expressed their ideas and actions individually and collectively about personal life, family life, and societal life. So, women's identity in its totality has a plurality of meanings: gender and power.

Sylvia Vatuk (2008); Nadja-Christina Schneider (2009) and some other Indian women scholars examined how the idea of 'Islamic feminism' in the Indian situation can challenge the patriarchal domination of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board. Nadja-Christina Schneider (2009) highlighted the question of whether Islamic feminism is just a discourse or activism. She stated that there should be a distinction between Islamic feminism as a discursive movement and a distinct organizational movement. In India, various Islamist organizations and women-led organizations are working for gender equality, which may be labelled as Islamic feminism but these organizations have not adopted Islamic feminism as ideology or discourse. Nadja-Christina Schneider (2009) argued that Islamic feminism is a discursive practice among women scholars in India that is not adopted by women's rights activists. Muslim women's rights activists never accept the label 'feminist' or 'Islamic feminist' as it still has a negative or ambiguous connotation in non-Western contexts.

### **Paradox of the conservative and progressive narrative on Muslim women's status**

In principle, Muslim society is regulated by Islamic holy books and Islamic schools of thought. Islamic holy books provided the provision of equality between men and women. But over the period of time, patriarchy got overpowered in the political, economic, social and even religious realms of Muslim society. Male domination in religious affairs and patriarchal interpretation of holy texts further strengthened the subordination of women in Muslim societies across the world. Indian Muslim women are the most vulnerable in terms of education, work, employment, financial independence, political position, social status and cultural participation. Mohammad Yasin (1958) pointed out that the position of women varies from time to time and from society to society. Islam permitted polygamy and imposed *purdah* (seclusion) that eventually went against the status of women. Shahida Lateef (1983) examined the historical factors related to the backwardness of Muslims and the modernizing process in Muslim society. She has revealed that there was no unity and cohesion in receiving modernization among Muslims in India. Muslims along with Hindus came into conflict with the British for new policies such as English education, abolition of sati, polygamy, *purdah*, arbitrary divorce and slavery. Islamic scholars like Shah Waliullah analyzed the reason for the

decline of Mughal rule and cited the reluctant exercise of *Shariah* law (Islamic law) by the emperors as the prime reason. So, he advocated for strict observance of *Shariah* law in the state as well as in the daily life of Muslims. On the other side, a reformative modern scholar Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was concerned about the declining economic position of Muslims and their social backwardness. He advocated for secular education and secular political participation for Muslims without contradicting basic Islamic principles. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan dedicatedly began the socio-religious reformation of Muslim society. The establishment of the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh in 1875 was the foundation of his reform movement. Girls' education was opposed by Muslim clerics at that time, so college was only for boys. The first girl's school in Aligarh was established in the mid-1920s. Christian teachers used to teach girls in *pardah*. There was strong opposition against co-education in schools and colleges then. Muslim clerics denied modern English education and didn't allow girls to impart education in the co-education system introduced by the British. After 1920, many women's organizations emerged for Muslim women's rights such as the Women's Indian Association, the Federation of University Women, The National Council for Women and the All India Women's Educational and Social Conference etc. These organizations challenged the discrimination against Muslim women and advocated for their economic, political and educational upliftment (Lateef, 1983). Thus, Muslim women's status has been determined by conservative and progressive narratives. Patriarchal clerics advocate for Islamization and Islamic reform in Muslim society. Whereas, progressive Muslims have always been in favour of modernization. Islamic feminism as a sociological approach can develop consciousness among Muslim women regarding upliftment, equality and dignity of life. It may develop a socio-religious reform in Indian Muslim society.

### **Dialectic of Islamic Feminism and *Tabligh***

*Tabligh* (Islamic reform movement) has the objective of developing religious and spiritual reform in Muslim society. It is a contemporary Islamization process within Muslim society. *Tabligh* propagates Islam in line with 13<sup>th</sup>-century Arab Muslim society. It hardly considers the importance of modernism. Interaction with members of *Tabligh* has revealed that Muslim women are confined to domestic affairs mainly because of the conservative narrative regarding family and religious duties. According to *Tabligh*, a pious man has a religious duty to keep his wife and female members in *pardah*. In this situation, it is a challenge for Muslim women to get rid of oppression. But Muslim women, particularly working women in Guwahati city have progressive ideas of Islam because cosmopolitan culture has influenced them positively. *Tabligh* has firmly advocated for Islamization among Muslim women for their religious reform and empowerment. It doesn't focus on socio-economic, educational, political and cultural empowerment. The main aim of *Tabligh* is to reform Muslim's religious life and develop Islamic tradition. *Tabligh* still

considers women as a symbol of family modesty, of domestic well-being and as men's loyal subordinates. Followers of *Tabligh* believe that women are the source of many evil activities and they are prone to commit sin. So, it is the prime duty of men to regulate women and keep them within a proper religious boundary. Members of *Tabligh* shared that they are working for religious progress among women and bringing reform in the practice of Islam. So, their approach to women's empowerment is pro-patriarchal and dogmatic. They stated that the only way to be successful in worldly life as well as in life after death is Islamization through *Tabligh*. Their idea of life gives less emphasis on material well-being or worldly life. Modern education is worldly or material activity as per *Tabligh*. However, it does not fully disregard modern education but rather emphasizes women's *purdah* while attending educational institutions. *Purdah* in this context means wearing hijab and maintaining social distance from men and public appearances. Women's seclusion at home and in domestic affairs is religiously justified by saying that their afterlife will be better if they follow restrictions in this worldly life. Members of *Tabligh* also believe that early marriage (just after 18 years) is necessary for Muslim girls to protect them from sinful exposure to the material world. These members have preferred correspondence education or distance education for their girl child to avoid public appearances. They argued that women's involvement in *Tabligh* can improve their spirituality and religiosity. For them, women with experience in *Tabligh* are better at nurturing children, caring for in-laws and performing domestic duties.

According to these members of *Tabligh*, Islamic feminism is nothing but a Western idea and un-Islamic ideology to disrupt Muslim society. So, it opposed Islamic feminism, which propagates a progressive Islamic narrative regarding women's status. Members of *Tabligh* follow religious conservatism and orthodoxy in the matters of women's education, economic independence and social exposure. They are against progressive interpretations of Islamic life. *Tabligh* trains women to be good wives, daughters and mothers but Islamic feminism aims to make women economically, politically, socially and culturally empowered members of society or citizens of a nation. Islamic feminism wants reform in the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic texts but *Tabligh* wants to maintain conservative interpretations.

### **Islamic feminism and the rise of self-awakening among Muslim women**

Islamic feminism is a new idea propagated by progressive Muslim women of Western, European and Middle Eastern countries. In India, the idea of Islamic feminism is still limited to specific Muslim women scholars. Common Muslim women seem unaware of it. Those Muslim women who are educated and liberal mostly follow Western feminism as a basic ideology of empowerment and liberation. Islamic feminism as a distinct idea is less popular among common Muslim women and even progressive Muslim women. Those who follow



Western feminism tend to denounce Islamic ideology and impart the Western value of socio-cultural liberalism. However Islamic feminism doesn't question Islam but rather challenges the misinterpretation of Islamic texts and the patriarchal narrative of Islam. It is a matter of study whether working Muslim women are influenced by Islamic feminism. Working Muslim women already broke the stereotype of Muslim society, so it is to explore their thoughts on Islamic feminism. Common housewives are again not a homogeneous group. The status of a housewife varies according to the social and economic status of her husband and family. The trend of liberation and empowerment among working women and housewives must be examined separately. In this study, Muslim women working in different formal organizations and institutions are interviewed. The study has revealed that there are three dimensions of Muslim women's empowerment: religious empowerment through *Tabligh*, socio-cultural liberation of Muslim women through Western feminism and socio-economic empowerment through Islamic feminism.

#### **Western feminism among Muslim women in Guwahati**

Western feminism is relatively popular among the urban middle-class working Muslim women in Guwahati. The educational attainment and professional engagement of these working Muslim women are the results of their parents' modern outlook and liberal ideas. They have pointed out some issues of Muslim society: religious conservatism, *purdah*, low educational attainment of women and early marriage. These women followed Western feminism and questioned the Islamic ideology regarding women's status. According to them, Muslim women cannot be empowered and uplifted unless they challenge conservative Islamic norms and regulations. They shared that conservative extended family and community members often put pressure on the early marriage of a girl and restrict her from doing the job. So, Muslim working women under the influence of Western feminism have advocated for modern education, and higher education including technical and professional education, financial independence, self-consciousness for dignified identity, late marriage, family planning and liberal religiosity.

One striking aspect of their daily life is that they don't wear *hijab* but rather follow the modern trends of dressing. For them, the *hijab* restricts women to household affairs only. It also restricts women from participating in cultural and sports activities. According to these women, *Maulanas* (clerics) use religious legitimation for patriarchal domination and religious conservatism in Muslim society. Clerics discourage modern education, and liberal ideas but encourage the early marriage of Muslim girls. In their sermons, clerics elaborate on the advantages of performing domestic activities, serving husbands and maintaining *purdah* by women. They usually describe how Muslim women can be good daughters, wives and mothers by following religious rules and regulations. Working women have argued that these restrictive rules and dogmas must be

discarded to empower Muslim women. These working women like to present themselves as less Islamic and more modern. Their economic, social and cultural life is completely modern and liberal. They distanced themselves from the Islamic way of life. Media, films, books, magazines and music regarding gender and women's issues have played a crucial role in diffusing Western feminism among these working women. Conservative Muslim families don't allow films, music and even progressive literature for girls and women. But these working women got the opportunity to watch films, listen to music, participate in cultural events, and learn music, which determined their modern way of life. Thus, liberal values in the family determine the empowerment of women. Western feminism can be considered as a means of liberalism and empowerment of Muslim women.

### **Islamic feminism among working Muslim women in Guwahati**

Islamic feminism has not been able to garner the constructive attention of Muslim women in Guwahati but a progressive idea for women's empowerment is reflected in their views. Islamic feminism aims to initiate institutional change in Muslim society. Scholars and activists of Islamic feminism are involved in organized research and academic practices for the reinterpretation of holy texts. They have also challenged male domination in Islamic organizations and religious bodies. This kind of approach and perspective is yet to develop among Muslim women in Guwahati. However, progressive ideas among Muslim women may lead to the beginning of Islamic feminism as an intellectual and ideological movement. The progressive idea among working Muslim women of Guwahati is that religion should not be the obstruction of women's upliftment. The Assamese Muslim society of Guwahati is one of the progressive Muslim societies of Assam in terms of modernization, women's status and religious liberalism. Assamese Muslim women don't follow the veil or *hijab* in their everyday life rather they dress like Assamese Hindu women. Working Muslim women don't follow *Purdah* (seclusion) and maintain modern as well as Assamese cultural appearances in professional life. But these women are religious in their private domain of everyday life. These women have argued that religious education should be in the form of scientific research on the *Quran* and *Hadith* for a better understanding of Islam and to find the relevance of Islam in modern society. Religious education should not be limited to reading texts and performing rituals. Working women are progressive regarding their economic status. Financial independence is a basic condition of individual identity. They also believe that women must be conscious of their empowerment. A husband's financial position should not determine the position of women rather commitment and enthusiasm for self-upliftment are necessary among Muslim women. However, freedom of doing a job or work is not a usual practice in Muslim society. Muslim clerics discourage the job or work of women by saying men are the protectors or custodians of women.

Participation of Muslim women in socio-religious organizations, events, prayers and festivals is also opposed by the conservative Islamic narrative. But Assamese working Muslim women take an active part in the various socio-religious organizations and religious discussions. They argued that women must be allowed for prayers at the *Mosque* and *Eidgah* (place of Eid prayer). Some seminars and panel discussions organized in Guwahati on Islamic issues, *Quran* and *Hadith* have included women as panelists and invited Muslim women to participate. However, there was no such talk carried out on liberal interpretation of Islamic texts. Events have been organized in hotels, conference halls and community halls. However, in the conventional pattern, sermons and lectures are organized only in *Mosques* and *Madrassa* (Islamic educational institutes) for male participants. Conventional patriarchal clerics have their pattern of delivering Islamic sermons in a gathering of mere male participants. Islamic sermon doesn't have a scope of discussion and debate but one-way deliberation. These Islamic events are called Islamic *Jalsa* or Islamic *mehfil*. Clerics start addressing the audience by uttering the words: "brothers in the *mehfil* and sisters in the *purdah* of the house". According to clerics, women must listen to Islamic sermons from the house because *purdah* is mandatory. But working women want to participate in Islamic seminars and symposiums. In their view, Muslim women's active participation in the Muslim Personal Law Board in India should be initiated for restructuring Shariya laws. They are not challenging fundamental principles of Islam but their concern is regarding socio-religiously constructed narratives of women's subordination and patriarchal domination in Islamic education. Muslim women in India are subjugated by the patriarchal ideology of clerics and various male-dominated Islamic organizations. Another serious concern is the restriction of Muslim girls in sports and cultural activities. Conservative Islamic narrative of *purdah* restricts Muslim women's participation in such activities. Working Muslim women who are interviewed in the present study participate in cultural activities like *Bihu* (a cultural festival in Assam) and other cultural activities. They have the view that Muslim young girls should come forward to participate in sports and athletics. In their view, Islamic principles never prohibited the participation of women in sports but patriarchal clerics developed a narrative of *purdah* for restriction. They also have positive views regarding the participation of Muslim women in cultural activities.

Therefore, it can be argued that progressive Islamic ideas are developing consciousness among working Muslim women about the need for reform in Muslim society. These women are working in a multicultural environment, so they have better exposure to modernism and liberalism.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that Islamic feminism is a sociological approach to emancipate Muslim women from the patriarchal domination in Muslim society.

Islamic feminism believes that the egalitarian value of Islam must be reinterpreted with a liberal and modern outlook. Though Islamic feminism is not very popular in India, progressive Islamic ideology has emerged among certain sections of Muslim women. Islamic feminism is still an academic practice and it is yet to develop as a women's movement in India. It has been revealed that Assamese working Muslim women are much more liberal and progressive in their socio-religious lives. The influence of Western feminism and progressive Islamic principles have a positive impact on the empowerment of Muslim women in Guwahati. However, the Islamic reform movement like *Tabligh* strictly contradicts the idea of Islamic Feminism. *Tabligh* aims to develop a conservative Islamic culture among Muslim women, which can only be challenged by Islamic feminism. Thus, it can be stated that Islamic feminism must be promoted for self-awakening among Muslim women regarding their emancipation and empowerment.

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