

Disenfranchised and Marginalized Women: A Study of Muslim Women

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of politics in uplifting the socio-economic condition of Muslim women amid religious orthodoxy, and how political system negotiated with the question of equality and empowerment ensuring liberation from unjust social, cultural and religious laws, which debar Muslim women from equality and their participation in decision making. The quotations from various critics, transcending the limits of patriarchy and religion, from previous centuries have been incorporated to substantiate the essential understanding on how one gender must not be relegated to a secondary status, which is tantamount to cruelty. How religion with connivance of politics poses a major impediment to the growth of Muslim women is a major concern of this paper. The paper will be touching upon various resistance strategies by Muslim women to fight the unjust patriarchy.

Key Words: *Gender, Socio-Economic condition, Muslim, Disparity, Marginalisation, Patriarchy*

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* argued that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'. (Beauvoir, 1973, p.301). Based on this very proposition by Simone it can be said that patriarchy in its various forms legitimises its dominance over a female by encoding unjustified cultural norms practiced by robust social institutions of family and marriage, legally regulated by social, political, religious and economic entities. The root of the state of marginality and oppression of women is traced in the cultural formation of gender as argued by feminists 'is constructed' rather than naturally formed. John Stuart Mill argues in his essay *The Subjection of Women* that 'the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself and now one of the chief

hindrances to human improvement (Mill, 1869). He further writes, 'There is no other situation in life in which it is....considered quite natural and suitable, that the better should obey the worse' (Mill, 1869). In 19th and 20th century in Europe, there was written a body of polemical literary work exposing the malign nature of patriarchy in systematic exclusion of women from outer world. The vigorous intellectual engagement of feminist authors brought the issue of women plight and marginalisation into a debate, problematising the domination of male by projecting the image of women as weak, emotional and intellectually dull. Still there are persistent fights and movements going on around the globe to attain the rights and equality for women.

As this paper intends to explore the socio-economic and political condition of Muslim women, so I am required to look at the questionable hegemony of entities, which actually prevents a Muslim woman to be equal to a male. Recently there has been a hot debate on the issue of Triple Talak endorsed by Muslim Personal Law Board, where the government took up the issue on various forums through media and academia to bring about justice to Indian Muslim women and endeavoured to introduce Uniform Civil Code to do away with this devastating practice. Since the battle was raised by the Right Wing government, the resistance was inevitable as the image of Right Wing has been an anti-Muslim and the step was speculated to polarise and appease further. The paper is not aimed at discussing the political confrontation, rather at questioning the causes of deplorable condition of Muslim women at length. The Muslim population in India according to 2011 census was approximately 172 million with almost half of women population i.e. 85 million with majority of female living life of extreme poverty. After adoption of constitution in 1952, the Indian citizens were guaranteed with fundamental rights under various articles irrespective of religion, caste, sex, creed and ethnicity. Some of the words in the preamble of constitution such as democratic, justice (social, economic and political) and equality (status and opportunity) demonstrate the spirit of constitution. The freedom of religion and faith does not authorise any religion to govern the life of its followers in a way that hampers the growth of their socio-political status and pushes them to the abyss of poverty and deprivation. The Islam acts according to Sharia, which has its own

set of rules, sometimes misinterpreted by religious authorities. There are multiple instances showcasing the modernity of Muslim women especially in entertainment industry without much uproar. The mobility of upper strata Muslim women was never completely restricted in post-independence era. In social and political sphere too their visibility was noticed, though not in equal proportion to the visibility of Hindu women.

The education plays an important role in the formation of individual's psychodynamics. Women in general being a pivotal to a family structure encounter a number of instructions through oral narratives produced by theocrats and high priests. This set of instructions through the process of narrativisation starts getting ingrained and naturalised in psyche of individual. The precedents are laid to dissuade the offenders. This process of instilling ideas in the brain of women makes her a part of larger submissive folk who already have consented. Every religion of the world has exercised this kind of strategy to control women. During 17th and 18th century British gentry women were served with conduct literature whereby they would obtain the instructional education that would enable them to be eligible for a prospective groom. The women would only study the religious literature that automatically negated the opportunity to compete with their male counterpart; whereas male would study various branches of knowledge like law and politics whereby they would make career in navy, court and church. All the realms of opportunity were forbidden to women on account of their inability imposed on by patriarchal structure of society. Mary Wollstonecraft in her ground breaking book

The Vindication of the Rights of Women advocated the urgency of equal education system for women as well:

I attribute [these problems] to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers ... the civilised women of this present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect. (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p.16).

This statement of Wollstonecraft has revolutionised the way of thinking of women by exposing the discriminatory education system. This very idea of equality is always central to the empowerment of women in any religion. The education given in madrasa to Muslim girls does not empower them with employment oriented education as it is primarily religious. The upper class Muslim women manage to get a good education in comparison to poor Muslim women, resultantly making them more vulnerable. As in above instances, it becomes evident that without education a woman can not contribute to society progressively.

The Sachar committee conducted a survey to study the socio-economic and educational status of Muslims in India. The data compiled for study showcased a shocking figure of percentage of Muslims in educational institution and employment. The

ratio of education in Muslims is very less than the other minorities of India. Their condition is even worse than schedule and schedule tribes. This backwardness of Muslims in India has been studied by other committees and non-governmental organisations too. The women of Muslim community are worse sufferer as the condition of women primarily depends on economic condition of their family and society also. The dearth of resources as discussed pressurizes a community to lead a life of poverty without basic necessities of bread, cloth and shelter. The scarce availability of resources adversely impacts the health of women. The government of India has introduced various programmes to uplift the condition of minorities in India. The access to these facilities by Muslims is less than other minorities. There are some questions arise why the condition of Muslims does not improve despite various awareness programmes. The main reason is mistrust and fear psychosis in Indian Muslims, which has its root in historical development of India after independence. Muslims do not feel safe and the turmoil of Kashmir and Pakistan dominates the larger part of debates. The political manipulation also contributes to the dismal condition of Muslims. The role of women in the family is very crucial and central. If community faces economical backwardness, its women suffer a lot as well. To understand the condition of Muslim women in India it is imperative to study the pattern of their faith system. Though in Christianity and Hinduism the faith system created hindrance in the progress of women, the women studied and equipped themselves with the type of education, which enabled them to compete with male. The gender discrimination

became part of the academic discourse and role of women as crucial to the development of a community and eventually to the nation.

The Muslims in India are comprised of various castes system same as the Hindu caste system functions. Do the women of lower caste Muslim live the same existence as the upper caste Muslim women? Whether it is the question of Muslim, Hindu or Christian, they all equally follow the caste system. The upper caste women comparatively enjoy respectability and safety which ensures their chances of getting some opportunity to participate in public life, though dismal.

The question of caste predominantly relegates the question of gender in India. The women of Muslim lower caste face extreme exploitation and suppression. On account of lack of land and access to job the women of lower caste remain always the most vulnerable. When communal riot occurred in poll bound area of Muzaffarnagar, the majority of Muslim refugees were of landless lower Muslim castes who were working as agricultural labour on the fields of Hindus landlords. The Sachar Committee found that the percentage of Muslim bureaucrat is not more than 3 percent of total bureaucracy. If their caste is investigated they will be found from upper caste Muslims exclusively. The affirmative action taken by governments providing reservation to backward Muslim has not got a desired level of expectation. On the other hand reservation cannot remove poverty as it is a provision to give representation to all the oppressed and underprivileged communities at every level of government functionaries. To uplift the socio-economic condition of Muslim women inclusively, the

government should take equal measures which consider the vulnerability of female at priority.

The Islamic religiosity dominates the lives of Muslim women primarily vis-à-vis lives of women of other religion. The mistrust in government functionaries, especially at a time of polio eradication drive, was shocking and drew the attention to the state of segregation and alienation particularly in the Muslim dominated areas. This reflected the dire need of education for entire community in general and women in particular. In various Islamic countries the voice of protest and demands of women rights are heard and governments of such countries have been considering the need of reformation. Muslim women require autonomy of taking her own decision and to pursue the professional education; the greater autonomy, the larger possibility to understand and locate herself in the given society. The burden of childbearing on Muslim women curtails her quest for self-fulfillment and participation in activities outside the four walls of house. The women of other communities in comparison to Muslim women enjoy some degree of autonomy. The requirement of personal space for female gender is same in all the communities, but a few liberate themselves from unjust traditional approach to life and prefer the new modes of living life with her own sense of worth in the world. Until they experience joy and frustration while bearing responsibility, they cannot feel the existence of their own, but autonomy becomes elusive without proper education and economic independence. The socialisation of Muslim women under rigid conventional mode makes them more submissive to religious

orthodoxy, leading life with gender disparities and inequitable gender relations, and not raising voice for democratisation as they are not allowed to access rational education. Though in post-independence India the Muslim world saw a spate of movements by liberal Muslim women such as Women's Rights Network, the Muslim Women's Forum, Committee for the Protection of the Rights of Muslim Women, STEPS Women's Development Group, the Progressive Muslim Association, and Muslim Satyashodhak Samaj etc. The demands of these groups included invalidation and criminalisation of polygamous marriages, an end of the unilateral male repudiation in all marital contracts, the extension of inheritance rights in agricultural land to women in all Indian states, an end to the practice of dowry, giving rights to women to reject the marriage alliance forged by family patriarchs against their will or when they were minors, community courts becoming more open to women's plea for divorce and inclusion of women in prayer group and in councils also. (Subramanian, 2008).

Despite all possible efforts and movements from a long time by various Muslim and non-Muslim organisations, the question of Muslim women in India has been an unproductive and hollow debate as the structure of society and politics is complex. No positive outcome of any endeavour appears to come to ameliorate the socio-economic condition of Muslim women. The one of the major obstacles for Indian Muslim to improve their economic condition is their inability to assimilate with other communities and modernise themselves to new emerging global challenges. The whole

discussion concerning Muslims (with women in centre) needs to be refashioned and restructured so as to identify the real causes and adopt effective measures to control falling trend in the graph of poverty. Muslims need to be homogenised in Indian system, though uniform civil code is resisted:

“Liberals have objected to a uniform civil code on the grounds that it is a euphemism for a Hindu-fication of the civil law or an extension of the BJP's Hindu nationalism. Yes, the orthodoxies of all faiths have rituals and traditions that militate against equality for women to differing degrees. In some Hindu temples and prayer areas, menstruating women are not allowed in. Studies show little difference percentage-wise between Hindus and Muslims when it comes to marrying off girls when they are grossly underage — according to the last Indian census, nearly 8 million girls were married off before they turned 10. For years, Christian women did not enjoy equal succession rights to property. This patriarchal collision between faith and freedom is not unique to India. The United States is still grappling with the clash between religious beliefs and a woman's reproductive rights to contraception and abortion. But despite violations that continue in practice, legally, Hindu laws have been reformed from time to time. In India's case, the scrapping of triple Talaq, should it happen, would not only be an opportunity to demand the end of all religious laws but also could usher in

the birth of a post-religious constitutionalism that upholds equality above rituals. Yes, a common legal code must not be a Hindu charter or hegemonic in character; it can draw from the ideals of all religions, but it must be rooted in agreed principles of justice and parity. Feminism must triumph over faith.”(Washington post)

Finally, the Governments must stop counting Muslims as a mere vote bank by focusing only on politics of polarisation and appeasement. The lack of will and

inefficiency of Governments also contributed to the growing mistrust in Indian Muslim which pushed the Muslims to further radicalisation. The religious clerics must analyse deeply the factors responsible for poverty and employment oriented education to reverse the trend of poverty graph be the priority. The Government can only chart out the plan to eradicate the poverty if Muslim community themselves pace with the government. If women get good education, their contribution to family and society remarkably moulds the future of coming generations.

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