



Religion, patriarchy and women in Indian society

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Abstract

Religion is thought to be the original rulebook of patriarchy. It is generally argued that it is religion which developed and strengthened the power of patriarchy in our society. And exercising power in the society, both closely related with each other. An academic research on this fact may lead to present opposite pictures sometime. Religion is always neither in favour of male society nor does it always suppress female folk. It is patriarchy sometimes either hijacks the faith or suppresses those women-centered laws in religious books and brings it into line with the prevailing patriarchy to undermine women's status. The present article tries to feature the actual facets of religious system of Islam and how it is manipulated in favour of patriarchal society in India.

Keywords: Religion, women, patriarchy, society, domestic life, Islamic rights, traditions, shara, etc.

Introduction

The philosophical inception of Islam rests on equality between men and women. At the time of Prophet women enjoyed equal power and rights. They participated in public life, even in battle field with their counterparts. A number of scholars who have explored the foundational history of Islam, however, have pointed out that initially it tended to be egalitarian and that patriarchy came later. As Karen Armstrong writes, "The women of the first *ummah* (community) in Madina took full part in its public life, and some, according to Arab custom, fought alongside the men in battle. They did not seem to have experienced Islam as an oppressive religion, though later, as happened in Christianity, men would hijack the faith and bring it into line with the prevailing patriarchy [1]."

When Islam spread all over the world it did not keep intact as its original form as it actually propagated in Arab and indigenous traditions and customs were becoming its integral part in course of time both by long co-habitation with local culture and the conversion of local people. Such as the Muslim society in India which developed neither secular nor Islamic but an amalgamated acculturated distinctive socio-religious cultures which are partially similar stipulating in Islam. It may be exemplified by the status of women in our society in India. Status of women as daughter, bride and mother is well defined in the Quran and Hadith but hardly found to be implementing in India.

Materials and methods

In this present writing an attempt has been made to analyze the actual position of women in religion in some selected pockets and what practiced in our society is contradictory to some degree with religious texts. Therefore, the religious books and scripts are largely used. Status women in our society are changed time to time. An historical approach of evolutionary-analytical method is used to discuss the contradictory position of women. Statistical data, observation and interviewing are few important tools to collect source materials for this study.

Status of daughter

In pre-Islamic Arab killing of female infants was very common and very often the moment a female was born she was buried alive. It was prohibited and declared a serious crime of murder. "When the female (infant), buried alive, is questioned, for what crime she was killed [2]."

This evil practice has been discontinued for the last 1400 years in Arab but unfortunately it is yet prevalent in India. In a BBC documentary film titled "Let her die" shown in the programme "Assignments", that everyday more than 3,000 foetuses are being aborted in India on being identified that they are female [3]. In a year it is more than one million.

Female infanticide has been present in our country for centuries. No wonder the female population of India is less than the male population. According to the 1901 census of India, there were 972 females for every 1000 males. According to the 1981 census, there were 934 females for every 1000 males in India and the latest statistics of 2011 is 940 females per 1000 of males. Earlier only female infanticide was being resorted to, but now with the advancement of Science and Medicines to suit this act, there has been added another crime of aborting female fetuses. A recent study by Canadian research team finds out the shocking fact that female foeticide in India crossed one crore in 20 years. Pre-natal sex determination was banned in 1994 but 5,00,000 female fetuses have been destroying every year. According to a recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) up to 50 million girls and women are missing from India's population as a result of systematic gender discrimination in India. In most countries in the world, there are approximately 105 female births for every 100 males. While there exists no quick and easy solution to the problem, it is possible to reduce gender inequality, which lies at the core of femicide [4].

Islam not only prohibits female infanticide but also rebukes the thought of rejoicing on the news of birth of a male child and not rejoicing on the news of the birth of a female child. "When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) a

female (child), his face darkness, and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance) the choice they decide on ^[5]?"

In Islam the girl child is entitled to support, educate and upbringing and good treatment equally with male child. According to an authentic hadith, Prophet Muhammad said, "Anyone who brings up two daughters properly they will be very close to me on the day of Judgment ^[6]."

It was narrated on the authority of Abu Sa'id that the Prophet said: "No one has three or two daughters or sisters, and he fears Allah regarding them and is kind to them, except that he will enter Paradise ^[7]."

It was narrated on the authority of Jabir that the Prophet said: "Whoever has three daughters whom he gives refuge to, provides for and shows mercy to, Paradise is certainly guaranteed for him." A man asked, "And (for) two, O Messenger of Allah?" He replied: "And also (for the one who has) two (daughters), A man asked, "And (for) one, O Messenger of Allah?" He replied: "And also (for the one who has) one (daughter) ^[8]. The same applies if he has sisters or paternal or maternal aunts etc.

"The Prophet said, 'He who has a slave-girl and teaches her good manners and improves her education and then manumits and marries her, will get a double reward.... ^[9]'

In India the literacy rate of male and female shows great difference. According to the census of 2011, the male literacy is 82.14% and Female literacy rate is 65.46%. One can realize the fact that why there is more than 16.68% gap between both sexes. From 1961 to 2001, sex ratios for children under age 6 have become more masculine ^[10].

Status of bride

At marriage, seeking permission from women is compulsory. No one - not even the father can force their daughter to marry against her wishes. According to the Quran, 'You are prohibited to inherit women against their will' ^[11] - Means, to marry the permission of both the parties are required. Reference may be made in regard of that fact in a hadith says, 'that a lady she was forced by her father to marry against her wishes' - And she went to the Prophet and the Prophet invalidated the marriage' ^[12].

Dowry is *haram* (prohibited) but dower from bridegroom makes compulsory for solemnizing marriage.. And it is mentioned in the Qur'an that 'Give to the woman in dower (a marital gift)' ^[13].

But unfortunately in Muslim society, either they keep large sum amount of *Mahr* but give a very nominal part in cash or just keep a nominal '*Mahr*' to satisfy the Qur'an, such as 2001 Rupees, or some people give 786 Rupees and they spend hundreds and thousands of Rupees on the reception, decoration, flowers, lunch parties, and dinner parties etc. Although small amount as '*Mahr*' is given but big amount of cash and kind including refrigerator, T.V set, an apartment, a car, furniture etc., are demanded as dowry ^[14]. This may be increased on account of the status of the husband. And in most cases '*Mahr*' is not given in cash when it is large sum amount. While *Mahr* is given in form of landed property the bride never enjoys its income as her own. In most cases women are asked to give up *Mahr* at last stage of their old age in favour

of their husband. On average, a woman in three of them gets *Mahr* in cash now a days. Last century 90% women were deprived from their legal right of having *Mahr*.

There is a customary in Indian society to arrange party for the people (*Boryatri*) who accompanied bridegroom at marriage by the bride's father. In this way another kind of financial exploitation is done to regale the bridegroom's family and kin. is not permitted in religion. No expenditure should be Identity connects the individual to a broader social category, in which the individual associates himself or herself with. Shara does not deny 'self-nesses' after marriage. Women can uphold her parental name and title even after her marriage. No one can force her to change her maiden distinctiveness. The patriarchal thinking of Muslim society over enthusiastically changes her title as *bibi*, or *begaum* at the time of her marriage and psychologically make her understood that she is now under husband.

In Islam, a woman is considered as a householder - She is not considered as a housewife, because she is neither married to the house nor she does always stay at home for cleaning, cooking and taking care of children but equally shares all with her husband. To *Shara*, a woman is not married to a master that she should be treated like a slave - She is married to it is equal ^[15]. It is mentioned in the Qur'an says that, '...the women have been given rights similar against them (men) on equitable terms but the men have a degree higher...' ^[16]. Most of the scholars misinterpret this verse. The word '*Kawwam*' means, 'one degree higher in superiority'. But actually the word '*Kawwam*' comes from the root word '*Ikamah*' means stand up'. Even 'Ibne-Kathir' the famous commentary writer of the Qur'an, says that the word '*Kawwam*' means one degree higher in responsibility, not one degree higher in superiority ^[17]. Husband has to bear all financial liabilities of his household. If a Woman works, which she does not have to - whatever earning she gets, it is absolutely her property. She need not spend on the household - if she wants to spend it is her free will. Irrespective how rich the wife is, it is the duty of the husband to give lodging, boarding, clothing and look after the financial aspects of the wife. Allah states that, "Let the rich man spend according to his means; and the men whose resources are restricted, let him spend according to what Allah has given him ^[18]". A woman is even allowed to take from her husband's property without his knowledge if he falls below this basic level of supporting her. In a *hadith* recorded in Muslim and Bukhari, the Prophet (peace be upon him) told Hind bint Utbah, after she complained that her husband, Abu Sufyan, was stingy and was not maintaining her and she asked if she could take from his property without his knowledge: "Take which is sufficient for you and your child according to what is customary ^[19]".

Another *hadith* also states that when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was asked by a man, "What is the right of our wives upon us?", he (peace be upon him) answered: "That he should feed her whenever he eats and cloth her whenever he clothes himself, that he not hit her face, that he not call her ugly and that he not boycott her except within the house ^[20]". Unfortunately, what is stipulated in the Quran and Sunnah is not practiced in Indian society. Women either lose their rights or in the name of Islam are blackmailed to do such activities which are based on local tradition, customs, ancestors' family

teachings etc. In the base of these norms is view that young bride should bring about handsome dowry from her parents including cash money, jewelry, furniture, electronics goods etc. But bridal dowry (mahr) which is obligatory to give new bride is not paid immediately. During the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions, Mahr Mu'ajjal (المهر المعجل/in cash) was the accepted practice except one. A very poor sahabi was permitted to give mahr (المهر المؤجل/deferred mahr) later on special ground. The Prophet (peace be upon him) asked him "Even if you have an iron ring, give it to woman as a dowry." When the companion said, "Even I have no an iron ring", the Prophet asked "can you teach her the chapters (surah) that you memorized from the holy Qur'an"? The companion replied "yes", then the Prophet (peace be upon him) said to him: "I have married you with her, as long as you teach her the chapters (surah) that you memorized from the holy Qur'an ^[21]."

Usually, a bride lives with her husband in his parental home, where she should accept the authority of her husband's senior relatives especially parents. Both in urban and rural areas of India, many middle class families live in one home or joint family home with a room allocated for each couple. Though Islam prefers nuclear family system but patriarchal extended/joint family is the common feature of Indian Muslim extended from two to three generations. In this latter family system the married women used to serve various members her husband family. The new bride spent her time working with her mother-in-law and other seniors in the home under their control and supervision. She is instructed to help them according to their orders: nursing of younger members of family, cooking, baking, cleaning, washing and see for animals or plot, meet guests and etc. Sometimes the young women are largely prevented from attending daily rituals because of their heavy duties and work load at home. Mother in-law who has married sons gives many time to exercise her authority over family, gives time to her neighborhood's obligations and visits to families' events of neighbors and relatives so great domestic work lies to shoulders of young woman. According to local norms young woman should eat meals neither before nor with husband, even all the male members of the family. She has to ask permission for visiting own parents or relatives from her in-laws instead of husband. It is customary that the expenditure at the time of her pregnancy and birth of first baby or even more should be laid in the shoulders of her parents.

If the young bride refuses to serve these duties or live with her in laws or decline to care for them with loving devotion she would be punished severely. It is common sexual violence that happens all across the Muslim families. Man considers that he has right to punish his wife as a subordinated person and claims wife should be absolutely submissive to his orders, and even because he considers that wife and children are his property. Although the Prophet (peace be upon him) said "The best of you is the best of you to their family and I am the best of you to my family ^[22]."

She does not have time for her education and health, she has no enough time for dream and own development. If she would like to continue of education or work outside of home she should have permission of husband and his parents. Brides are bounded to limit in their choices; they are limited in their life

goals. Women's protests are punished and they are afraid to become alien for members of their husband's families and relatives. So they agree with current situations and take up many obligations that limit their freedom and their rights which in favor of their own future and for preserving right to be a wife, a mother and status of married woman. Now the condition is changed slowly. In the urban areas, women are not available to tend their in laws and husbands are also changing their outlook in case of their wife's education and working outside home. The lives of bride in the rural areas have little different story. Illiteracy is common among the Muslim societies. Only a few families in the tiny upper middle class have experienced the entrance into education and modern sector work. Most often married women are still bound to reside with other members of the family and largely controlled by the people of their husband. Demand for dowry is increasing. In laws can take on more of an administrative position of managing of the labour of one or more daughter – in- laws in the joint families. As a result stresses and strains are becoming more apparent in the families.

In light of the guidance of the Quran and the Sunnah described above, the wife has absolutely no duty and responsibility laid upon her by Islam towards her husbands' family or in-laws, including the husbands parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, etc. The responsibility and duty that Islam has laid upon the believing wife is only towards making sure that her husband is pleased and satisfied with her. She is absolutely under no obligation to take care or serve her husband's parents or family; the duty and ultimate responsibility that the parents are served and well cared for is entirely upon the direct off-spring of the parents. But if the wife, of her own will and choice, wishes to go over and above her prescribed duties and in her benevolence serves the parents and/or family members of her husband, she would be doing the extremely meritorious deed of good treatment, and Allah absolutely loves those who do good behaviour or deeds over and above their prescribed duties. If a husband is blessed with a wife who does good treatment and serves his parents, he should be extremely grateful and thankful to her for superb gesture of benevolence and kindness. Thus the serving of ones in-laws would definitely be amongst the 'Nafl' (extra) or over and above ones prescribed duties and responsibilities.

Instead of all these religious rules and regulations, in India 90% domestic violence happens due to poor dowry(haram in Islam), cruelty of mother in laws, conflicts with relatives of husband, her willingness to work outside home or her willingness to have education and profession. Many wives both in urban and rural areas sacrifice her dreams for family peace and harmony. In this way Muslim women are becoming most backward marginalized class in the society. No one tries to improve this oppressive condition of the women to provide just and appropriate Islamic rights and honour. As a result of this the feminists severely criticize Islam for that condition of women without understanding the reality of Islamic teachings. Complete Islamic life and family system can only be the answer of the critiques.

Status of mother

According to the Qur'an the only thing above respect to Mother, is the worship of God. It mentions in the Qur'an,

Ch.17, Verse No.28-29, that... And your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age [while] with you, say not to them [so much as], "uff," and do not repel them but speak to them a noble word".

In Sahih Bukhari, Volume 8, Ch. No. 2 Hadith No. 2, describes that a man asked the Prophet Muhammad... 'Who requires the maximum love and respect and my companionship in this world? The Prophet replied – 'your mother' 'Who is next?' – 'your mother' 'Who is next?' – 'your mother' The man asked for the fourth time, - 'Who is next' The Prophet replied 'your father' So 75% of the love and respect goes to the mother and 25% of the love and respect goes to the father. Three fourth of the better part of the love and respect goes to the mother – One fourth of the remaining part of the love and respect goes to the father.

In practice, the position of mother specially at old age nothing to do what is decreed in the shara. At old age they force to go to the old-age-home for rest of their life. Even in some family, meager economic supports sometimes is not providing for their maintenance.

Conclusion

Patriarchy sometimes in disguise of religion and sometimes in the form of traditions played vital role and scrupulously dominated the rights of women in society. Socio-religious as well as economic and political rights of women with men is always not discriminating in religion. They enjoy almost equal rights in terms of moral, spiritual duties, acts of worship, the requirements of men and women except in some cases women have certain concessions because of their physical structure. Moreover, religion itself has a kind of own structural framework in which human way life is instructed to lead. One part is closely related with other part. When one part is implemented and other is not then the whole system would be fail in vain. And the patriarchal system of this society takes the advantage of such situation by manipulating in favour of them and its best example may be the recent talaq controversy in India.

There is great misunderstanding in regards of women rights in religion because of distortion of authentic laws or incomplete implementation, lack of understanding, controversial interpretation of *Shara*, misbehavior of some Muslims which has been taken to represent the teachings of Islam. The complete authentic sources should be the basic knowledge to justify the women's rights in religion and what the individual Muslim or the Muslim society is done in the name religion should not be taken in granted as Islam. Sex, colour, caste, wealth has got no criteria in Islam - the only criteria in the eyes of God is 'righteousness', neither is sex the criteria for God to reward or to punish a person. According to the Qur'an, Surah Imran Ch.3 Verse No.195 it says 'I will never suffer the loss of any of you, be it male or female, you are companions unto each other'.

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