

MUSLIM WOMEN ON THE MOVE

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There is widespread perception that Muslim women are among the most backward, illiterate and oppressed in the world. In media they are always shown clad in burqa or wrapped in hijab (veil). They are also perceived to be confined to the four walls of their homes totally cut off from outside world. While partly it is true but reality is much more complex and also not static. Generally we tend to oversimplify and assume reality to be static. In a fast changing world reality cannot be taken to be static. We should always pay attention to changing and emerging reality.

What happens in the Muslim world is usually blamed on Islam. The underlying assumption is that Muslim behaviour is always determined by religious belief and since Muslim women are backward and do not enjoy rights like other women it is because of Islamic teachings. This impression is further reinforced by the pronouncements of some orthodox 'ulama that want to see Muslim women wrapped in hijab.

It has to be borne in mind that firstly all Muslims do not behave according to what theologians or 'ulama say or even according to the teachings of Islam; secondly, social customs, traditions and social milieu exert their own pressure. It is difficult to ignore all this. Thirdly, there are multiple interpretations of Qur'an. Fourthly, modern world-view also plays an important role in determining one's point of view as well as behaviour.

The question of Muslim women, their social status and rights cannot be understood without keeping these things in mind. First of all it must be kept in mind that Qur'an makes clear pronouncement in favour of equal rights for both sexes (2:228). However, this vision of Islam for sexual equality could not find practical implementation for number of reasons. Those who embraced Islam, however sincere they might have been, were product of a fiercely male-dominated society. The Qur'anic pronouncement on the other hand, was an ideal which required very different cultural milieu. From sociological viewpoint it was not immediately implementable.

The scriptural understanding is always mediated through culture. The Arab culture was patriarchal and had set its own understanding of women's position. Thus the Qur'anic pronouncement of sexual equality was understood and implemented through mediation of Arab culture. What is worse Islam spread through deeply feudal societies like those of Iran, parts of Roman empire and India. The 'ulama certainly could not transcend cultural norms of these societies. Thus shari'ah formulations came into existence mainly in Iraq, Egypt and of course Madina. Iraq and Egypt were confluence of ancient cultures with age-old traditions of their own. These milieux greatly influenced the Muslim theologians in their understanding of Qur'anic pronouncement of sexual equality.

To meet the demands of their societies they selectively used Qur'anic verses and certain sayings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) to formulate shari'ah approach to women problem, their status and rights. This became medieval religious heritage, which no one could question. However, under pressure from modern social norms these Qur'anic pronouncements are being rediscovered by modernists and a debate is raging in the Muslim world today about rights of women in Islam.

Meanwhile the Muslim women are on the move in various Muslim countries. In every Muslim country and countries with considerable Muslim population like India education is spreading fast among Muslim women. This certainly brings increased awareness among women themselves and they press for their rights both Islamic as well as secular. There are both types of movements among Muslim women in Islamic world. In some Muslim countries Muslim women theologians have emerged with thorough knowledge of the Qur'an, Islamic theology and shari'ah. There are women theologians like Fatima Mirsani from Morocco, Amina Wadood and Riffat Hassam from USA and several others. Also there are women's organisations like 'Sisters in Islam' from Malaysia.

These Muslim women theologians and organisations are questioning the traditional interpretations of the Qur'an in respect of women's rights and developing new feminine oriented theology ensuring equal rights for men and women. Sisters-in-Islam from Malaysia is challenging the orthodox `ulama from Malaysia. They are even trying to get the concept of 'marital rape' accepted as a valid law.

As pointed out above reality is not static in Muslim women's world. The women in as orthodox society as that of Kuwait are demanding right to vote which is being denied to them by the Kuwait ruling elite. It is hoped they will win this right sooner than later. In Pakistan the women agitated in early fifties itself against the Pakistani Prime Minister when he married his secretary and took her as second wife. The agitation continued until Ayub Khan who had captured power in 1958 brought Muslim Family Ordinance in 1961, which put certain restrictions on polygamy and oral divorce. This ordinance could not be undone even during Zia-ul-Haq's period when the orthodox `ulama were closest to state power in Pakistan.

The Pakistani society, despite its ups and downs as far as project of 'Islamisation' is concerned, is on the move in changing women's social status. Recently seven Pakistani woman diplomats have been appointed ambassadors. An official of Pakistani foreign ministry said that it is for the first time so many women have been appointed ambassadors in important world capitals. They are all career diplomats and have been posted to European capitals. One woman Asma Aneesa, who was ambassador to one of the Central Asian countries, has been appointed on directing staff of National Defence College. No mean achievement.

Bangladesh, though otherwise quite poor and backward, is not far behind. There recently twenty female officers have completed two year gruelling military training and passed out from Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA). This training was for the post of second

lieutenant and their passing out ceremony was attended by Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

The Saudi society too is by no means as static as we think of. The Saudi women too are facing complex choices. There is no doubt compared to other Muslim countries they are subjected to stricter traditions. But there is no reason to assume that they are passive and inert to modern changes in the society. The Saudi society as a whole is conceived as governed by purely traditional Islam and totally shut out to modern world. The Saudi society is undergoing pangs of modern change and this is causing social convulsions and these social convulsions occasionally assume violent forms. This is subject of another article and cannot be discussed here.

We will discuss here only other issues related to women in Saudi Arabia. The women in Saudi Arabia are taking modern education. The princess called Umm Abdul Aziz, for example, said (see www.amanjordan.org) "We have our own traditions, but they do not prevent women seeking education." Though there are obviously separate educational institutions for women and there is no co-education in Saudi Arabia. They strictly follow the tradition of sexual segregation.

The News Letter of Pakistani women's organisation *Shirkatgah* of April 2003 says about changes among Saudi women, "Trying to balance the challenges of modernity with the demands of traditional past has meant that change is cautious and slow, but women insist that change is afoot." Mona Megalli says in her article "Saudi women face complex choices" in the above news letter, "Saudi women now outstrip men as graduates and other specialised colleges, making up 58 per cent of a total of nearly 32000 students in 2000." The female students listen to male instructors through closed circuit video an audio system.

There are many restrictions Saudi women have to grapple with. Women are not taught engineering and law, for example. They have to compete in touch job market in Saudi society. Similarly though women own 40 percent of private wealth and thousands of businesses from retail to heavy industry, they face frustrating legal and cultural restraints and they have to rely on male agents to deal with government offices.

It is also encouraging news from Jordan that it has amended law to give women equal rights. This was announced by Queen Rania. She made this announcement on the opening day of Arab first ladies dedicated to improving the conditions of women in the male dominated Arab world.

In Iran of course though women have to wear chador but chador has not been a constraint for them as far as work is concerned. Iran has very active women's movement in whole of Islamic world. They are active in practically every field of work and are present in large numbers in Iranian parliament too. In Indonesia too women have entered in educational field in a big way. There are large number of women in Islamic universities too and there is strong movement developing for women's rights.

Thus one must realise that reality is multi-layered and complex. Muslim women too are undergoing through throes of change the world over. The orthodox 'ulama can hardly restrain this forward march. More and more Muslim women are either challenging medieval theological formulations or simply ignoring them. They are trying to carving out their own niche in this male dominated world.