

Study on Status of Minority Women in India

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ABSTRACT

Indian society is an agglomeration of diverse cultures. There are numerous castes, tribes and ethnic and religious groups. "It is, therefore, Indian society is called a multicultural society. Every group has its own cultural specialty" (Linton 1936). We find caste cultural, tribal cultural, linguistic cultural, ethnic cultures and regional cultures etc. Every religious group has its own historical tradition and custom. Interestingly, among the Muslim, religion regulates the sacred and the secular practices. The Muslim, by and large, accepts their religion as unalterable and resists any major innovation. While discussing the "Modernization of Indian Tradition" points out that Islamic tradition is an exogenous source of change of Indian tradition but it has become a part of Indian tradition and has greatly influenced the revolution and the growth of Indian tradition in medieval times. The contact of India with Islam is one thousand years old. It started with Arab conquest of the Sind in the beginning of the eighth century.

Keywords

Minority, Women, Social Status, Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically as well as in magnitude, Islam is an important and sociologically very meaningful cultural tradition in India. Importantly, Islam was founded by the Prophet Mohammad in the desert of Arabia in 600 A.D. as a reaction to the polytheism of West Asia and spread first among the tribal groups of Arabia. "Originally, it developed to a nomadic society and its social structure was said to be egalitarian in character and was not highly stratified but when the Prophet came to Madina. The nomadic economic structure of the Islamic society changed into a mercantile agrarian social structure, which was more complex in organization (Singh, 1988). After the death of the Prophet Mohammad, the Khalifs-Khalifas (religious leaders) and the elected senior members of the community (like Quzis and Imams) were mainly instrumental in spreading of Islam to different parts of the world. In this expansion of Islam from Arabia to the other parts of the world, its basic social, economic and political structures got changed. For instance, the egalitarian and democratic structure of power was molded into a feudal – authoritarian structure during its expansion. A contradiction between the religious and political elites had emerged due to some political and cultural policies undertaken by the latter which were not approved by the former for not conforming to the religious perspective. "This contradiction still constitutes an important factor in the process of modernization in Islamic societies [1, 2, 4].

The Ulemas (religious elites) as representatives of the Islamic Great Tradition tend to be conservative and reject innovations which they think are not within the framework of the Islamic tradition" (Singh, 1988). However, during the expansion of Islam many structural and cultural features of the different countries were also assimilated into its original structure through its basic principles of equality and universal brotherhoods were shared by the entire Muslim population. For instance, before "the Islam came to Persia, the society was

divided into four major groups of priests, warriors, commoners and serfs" (Ansari, 1960). Likewise, in Syria Islam came into contact with the Christians mysticism and the emergent outcome was later known as Islamic Sufism (Ikram, 1984). It spread from Morocco to Indonesia through the countries in this wide region had their respective cultural historic background when they adopted the Islamic faith (Roy, 1979) [3]. Consequently, in every country Islam has to accommodate different types of customs, traditions and behaviour, which have resulted into the present cultural diversity among its followers. The Muslim society in India is sharply divided into two distinct sections. The ashrafs (four major immigrant groups of Sayyad, Sheikh, Mughal and Pathan) are the upper caste Muslims and they regarded themselves as the foreign descents and also they have traditionally enjoyed the highest rank in the Indian Muslim community. The converted Muslim was considered as non-Ashraf in India [5, 6].

2. STATUS OF MINORITY WOMENS

The status of Muslim women can also be looked at the context of the minority situation of the Muslims in India. First of all, it is necessary to define the meaning of minority. "Any group of people who because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination" (Haralambos 1980). From this definition, it is clear that a minority is one, which is marked by certain characteristics. However, the modernization of the Muslim women in India is potential catalysts; their emancipation could be a crucial step in the modernization of the community. Their present status reflects the dominance of traditional and conservative attitudes. An improvement in their status would not only imply a positive response to present-day needs but also hasten the process of the Muslim community's integration in to the mainstream of India's modernization effort [7, 8].

The process of Modernization in any society is closely related to the orientation of its people to change. Indian society is a male dominance society and women role are particular, they have to suffer more inhibiting constraints on self-realization than men. By a series of social sanction which have limited her role principally to that of mother and wife. As a customary, the main role of a woman is to take care of her children in their upbringing. She acts as the first teacher and guide of the child. So, it is necessary she should be educated. Social scientist have pointed out that there is a strong positive co-relation between the low status women and low cultural levels and insignificant societal achievements. In this connection, it is said that. "For full development of our human resources, the improvement of homes and moulding the character of a child during the most impressionable years of infancy, the education of a woman is of even greater importance than that of a man. It can be argued that Muslim women have been treated as subordinate to men for a long period and also, they have been having strong belief in the tradition [9, 11].

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Thus, the Muslim women in India are getting modernized within the framework of their religious orientation and culture. This does not mean that they are not given in principle, equality with men. Yet, they have to change their status and acquire cherished goal by maintaining the religious customs and traditions. It is true that due to the changes occurred in the socio-economic condition of the society they also try to break the un-Islamic tradition and misconceptions about their status and roles. In defining the role and status of Modern Muslim women we have to take into account their status, which has been constrained by religion for a long time as started earlier. We have also to consider the different internal and external forces which tend to bring about a new socio-psychological orientation in their outlook. In other words, a modern Muslim woman is to be regarded as a fusion of many forces. (Latif, 1983)[10].

The Muslim women are conscious about their roles in culturally prescribed pattern of behaviour. No doubt they are not ready to accept practices and custom like that women are not supposed to go out for job and education, they are not supposed to have a say in arranging marriage or selecting their spouse etc. These practices and customs are loaded upon them and are not sanctioned by Islam. In India, the social structure of Muslim women seems to be consisted of the core of the traditional cultural set up. However, with an interplay of a number of exogenous forces which have affected its traditional cultural set up and internal indigenous developments some changes can be seen in the Muslim society. More precisely, modern education, secularization and increased communication or mass media have led to the genesis of a relatively open and progressive Muslim social structure [12]. As a result, the Muslim women have begun their striving and to look at their problems from the rational and scientific point of view. A hitherto unforeseen change has also evolved in values and attitudes of the Muslim women towards men and their sexual relationship. The dominant values of pre-modern societies like dominance, dependence, segregation, servility, obedience and loyalty are also being replaced by independence, individuality, equality and companionship. The status of Muslim women in India is not better than that of other women. Muslim woman in India is influenced by the Islamic injunctions and also the impact of the Hindu culture and traditions because mostly Indians Muslims are converts from Hindustani. If we want to know the changing status and role of Muslim women in India, it would be better to give a brief account from traditional period to contemporary period. It is interesting because from India was invited by different rules in the past. These innovations had definitely influenced the Indian women [13, 14].

The analysis demonstrates that the plight of Muslim women in India is not better than that of women belonging to other social groups. Moreover, majority of the Muslim women are illiterate, low educated living in absolute poverty. Importantly, most of the Muslim women are confined to four walls of house and have been assigned the domestic work caring and nourishing of children, performing household activities etc. Only a small segment of Muslim woman is engaged in economic activities for substantial income contribution to families. Moreover, the role conflict among such woman has been observed to be high since they are facing the problems of official tasks and orthodox family attitude. Through, education and other factors have significantly changed the environment and Muslim women have started enjoying the liberal and democratic advantages and benefits. Moreover, a significant number of Muslim women in-developed status and areas has started peeping out their heads to participate in changed socio-economic factor. Importantly, the young generation is demanding more liberty

and breaking the orthodox norms of Muslim community. This demands the concerted effort on the part of government and non-government for empowerment of women and making them crucial counterparts of society for social advancement [15].

3. PARSIS COMMUNITY

Parsis are a small but prosperous religious community of India, which reached a peak of population of about 114 thousand in 1941. The recent census enumerated Parsi population about 69 thousand in 2001. The unprecedented fall in Parsi population has drawn the attention of researchers, policy makers, and Parsis themselves. For a declining population of this magnitude, demographers are anxious to know when the size is going to be halved and the timing by which a population is likely to be extinct. Parsis are the followers of monotheistic form of religion known as Zarathustra found 2500 years ago in Iran (Persia). They migrated to India from their motherland after the Arab victory over last ruler of Sassanid dynasty around 640 A.D (Briggs, 1852; Pithawalla and Rustomji, 1945). They first landed at around 100 miles North of Bombay, a place called Navasari in Gujarat and from there they moved to other cities in India. With the rise of political power of European trading companies in India by nineteenth century they acquired prominent positions in economic, educational and political life of the country. By the end of nineteenth century, 85 per cent of the Parsis community was urbanized, and only 15 per cent lived in the villages (Desai 1968; Bose and Kullar, 1978) [16, 17].

In India, Parsis maintained some sort of social isolation by practicing endogamy and not accepting any new converts to their faith (Visaria, 1974; Alexrod, 1980). However, they have selectively adapted themselves to social milieu of Gujarat by accepting the language and the dress of the region (Visaria, 1974). It may be noticed that during 1901 to 1941, there was a slow but steady increase in Parsi population. Although there occurred several famines and epidemics during this period, Parsis were least affected by these natural calamities as most of them were living in urban area (Visaria, 1974). After 1941, Parsi population declined. The figures of 1951 census were likely to be affected by the partition of the country due to exclusion of Parsis who remained in the city of Karachi or other parts of Pakistan (including present day Bangladesh). But even after considering the population of Parsis in Pakistan, in the Indian subcontinent as a whole, the growth of Parsi population during 1941-1951 was not more than two percent (Visaria, 1974)[18]. This shows that the effect of fertility decline on the growth of Parsi population started much before than the fertility decline experienced by the average Indian population in the mid 1970s. The incidence of non-marriage is much higher among Parsis (Karkal, 1982; Billimona, 1991; Singh and Gowri, 2000). A survey in Mumbai shows that a significant proportion of households was headed by unmarried males (9 per cent) and unmarried females (18 per cent) (Karkal, 1982) [19].

The marital structure of Parsi population shows a deviation from universally observed pattern of marriages in India (Kraal, 1975). The primary reason for non-marriages and late marriages is due to the concern of the young males and females to have an acceptable minimum standard of living for family formation (Visaria, 1974). As such, Parsis women are more concerned about their status and career. They are highly educated and work outside their homes. Marriage seems to be the second priority. Another peculiar feature of Parsi community is the lack of family or peer pressure to get married at a reasonable age (Bhavnagri, 2005; Gould, 1980; Ketyauntt, 1982). It is interesting to note that age at marriage

among Parsi women is about 27 years and among men it is about 31 years. One out of 5 males and one out of 10 females remained single even by age 50 compared to almost universal marriages among the Indian populations. It is worthwhile to note that Parsis vigorously retained their religion and distinctive form of dress; however, they embraced western behaviour and values in other domains. Their modernized values promote them to have marriages by their own choice; on the other hand parental and familial constraints and obligations are still formidable in the community and create a contradiction that is difficult to overcome. In the bargain, many of them remained never married. Inter religious marriages are also prevalent among Parsis, but they do not accept new converts to their faith. This has influenced the size of population among Parsis (Visaria, 1974, Axelrod, 1980). The Parsis who were residing in the state of Maharashtra had the lowest fertility compared to those living in Gujarat and other parts of the country. Since majority of Parsi population (nearly 80 per cent) is living in Maharashtra, their lowest fertility has contributed to the overall decline in Parsi population in India [20, 21].

The percent distribution of households by religion of the head of the household is presented in India by residence and for each state. In the vast majority of households in India, the household head is Hindu (82 per cent). Thirteen percent of households are Muslim, 3 per cent are Christian, 2 per cent are Sikh, 1 per cent are Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist, less than 1 per cent are Jain, and the remainder (less than 1 per cent) belong to all of the other religions including Zoroastrian and Donipolo in Arunachal Pradesh. Households headed by Muslims, Christians, Jains, and Buddhists/Neo-Buddhists comprise a slightly higher proportion of urban than rural households. Gender ratio has been reported significantly higher among Christians followed by Buddhists and Jains while it was reported low among Sikhs. Child sex ratio was reported low among Sikhs while it was recorded high among Christians and Muslims. Overall, gender ratio has been reported adverse among all the religions except Christians [1, 22].

4. LITERACY RATE

The literacy rate has been reported significantly higher among Jains (94.1 per cent) followed by Christians (80.3 per cent) and Buddhists (72.7 per cent) while it was reported low among Muslims (59.1 per cent). Female literacy was recorded low among Muslims (50.1 per cent) while it was recorded high among Jains (90.6 per cent) and Christians (76.2 per cent). Thus, Muslim women are educationally backward as compared to women belonging to other religious communities.

Literacy rates among Muslims in all the age groups have been recorded low as compared to the literacy rates among other minorities as well as General and OBC communities of Hindu religion. Literacy rates among minorities have been reported high in the age group of 16-17 years and 6-13 years age group while it was recorded low in the age group of 23 and above years.

The proportion of illiterates has been reported high among Muslims (47.9 per cent) followed by Hindus (40.5 per cent) and Buddhists (28.2 per cent) while it was recorded as low as 1.6 per cent among Jains. The educational levels (above 10 years) were recorded high among Jains Followed by Sikhs and Christians while it was recorded low among Muslims [5, 8, 23].

5. EDUCATIONAL LEVELS

Educational levels among women have improved significantly from 1999-2000 to 2009-2010. The educational levels among

women were reported high in urban areas as compared to educational levels among women in rural areas. During 2009-10, only 7.63 per cent Muslim women were graduates and above in urban areas as compared to 27.91 per cent among females belonging to other minority communities and 19.67 per cent all women in urban areas. The proportion of graduates and above among Muslims and other minorities has significantly increased from 4.68 per cent and 19.17 per cent respectively, in 1999-2000 to 7.63 per cent and 27.91 per cent respectively in 2009-10. Similarly, only 1.71 per cent Muslim women were found graduates and above as compared to 6.85 per cent women belonging to other minority communities in rural areas in 2009-10[24].

Media exposure has been reported high among women belonging to Christian, Sikh and Jain communities as compared to women belonging to other religions. More than 90 per cent women belonging to Jain community reported that they watch television at least once a week as compared to 45.5 per cent women belonging to Muslim community and 66.2 per cent women belonging to Buddhist community. The readership of newspaper has been reported by 76.7 per cent women belonging to Jain community as against 18 per cent women belonging to Muslim community. Visit to cinema theatre has been reported high among Jain community (19.1 per cent) and least among Muslims (3.2 per cent) [4, 25].

Fertility rate has been reported significantly higher among Muslim women (3.09) as compared to Sikh and Buddhist women (1.96). Mean number of children ever born to women aged 40-49 years has been also recorded high among Muslim women (4.60) as compared to Jain women (3.27) and Christian women (3.27).

Use of contraceptives has been reported high among Jain (75.4 per cent) followed by Buddhists (67.7 per cent), Sikh (66.5 per cent) and low among Muslims (45.7 per cent). The proportion of women not currently using any contraceptive was recorded high among Muslim women (54.3 per cent) followed by Christians (42.4 per cent) and low among Jain women (24.6 per cent) [7, 26].

Under-5 mortality rate has been recorded significantly high among Hindu women (76 per cent) followed by Muslim women (70 per cent), Buddhist (69 per cent) and low among Sikh women (52.1 per cent). Infant mortality has also been recorded high among Hindu women followed by Buddhists women and Muslim women.

Ante-natal care has been reported significantly high among Jain women followed by Buddhist women and Christian women while it was recorded low among Muslim women. Thus, Muslim women are facing more burdens of maternal diseases as compared to women belonging to other religious communities [11, 27].

Women belonging to Jain community reported that they delivered their babies in health facility centre (93.1 per cent) while only 1/3rd Muslim women reported that they delivered babies in health centre. Delivery at home was found significantly high among women belonging to Muslim communities (56.7 per cent) followed by women belonging to Hindu community (50.9 per cent) and Christian women (42 per cent). It was recorded as low as 4.1 per cent among Jain women [28].

About 94 per cent women belonging to Jain community reported that they received assistance of skilled health provider during their delivery while it was reported 38.8 per cent women belonging to Muslim community. About 90 per cent Jain women reported that doctors assisted them in their delivery while it was reported by only 30.2 per cent women belonging to Muslim community. The proportion of women belonging to Muslim community reporting that Dai and

friends / relatives assisted them in their deliveries was recorded significantly high as compared to the proportion of women belonging to other religious communities [29].

Health insurance coverage has been reported high among women belonging to Jain, Sikh and Hindu communities while health insurance coverage was recorded low among women belonging to Muslim community. The coverage of health insurance was recorded high for State Insurance Scheme and Central Government Health Scheme. However, about 30 per cent women belonging to Muslim community reported that they are covered by Commercial Health Insurance Scheme.

6. BUDDHIST COMMUNITY

About 21 per cent women belonging to Buddhist community reported that health workers have contacted them during last three months. This was recorded 18.3 per cent by Muslim women while only 4.7 per cent women belonging to Jain community accepted that any health worker has visited them during last three months. However, home as place of contact with health workers has been recorded high in case of Muslim women (71.7 per cent) as compared to 55.3 per cent among Sikh women [23].

Women belonging to Buddhist community are experiencing more physical violence (40.9 per cent) as compared to women belonging to Jain community (12.6 per cent). More than 1/3rd women belonging to Muslim and Hindu communities reported that they have ever experience physical violence. About 11 per cent Muslim women reported that they have ever experience sexual violence as against 2.8 per cent women belonging to Buddhist community and 3.9 per cent among Jain women.

About 2/5th women belonging to Muslim community reported that they have ever experience emotional, physical or sexual violence while it was reported as high as 47.2 per cent by Buddhist women and as low as 13.9 per cent by Jain women. The proportion of women who ever experience emotional violence has been recorded high for Buddhist women and low among Jain women.

Majority of women reported that the frequency of spousal violence has been sometimes. However, frequency of violence as often has been reported high among Buddhist women followed by Muslim women for the case of emotional violence and high among Muslim women and low among Buddhist women in case of physical or sexual violence[25].

Majority of the women who experience physical or sexual violence keep quite due to maintain their family relations. Majority of the women reported that they never told anybody regarding their experience of violence. This was reported significantly high among Buddhist women (73.6 per cent) followed by Muslim women (67.3 per cent), Hindu women (63.3 per cent) and Christian women (52 per cent). About 1/3rd women belonging to Christian and Sikh community reported that they sought help to stop violence against them [13, 23].

Work participation rate has been recorded high among women belonging to Buddhist communities (31.7 per cent) followed by Christian women (28.7 per cent) and Hindu women (27.5 per cent) while it was recorded as low as 9.2 per cent among Jain women and 14.1 per cent among Muslim women.

Work participation rate among women belonging to minority communities has shown fluctuating trend over the period of 1999-2000 to 2009-10. During 1999-2000, work participation rate among Muslim women was recorded 27.89 per cent as against 48.73 per cent among women belonging to other minorities in rural areas while it has declined to 22.07 per cent and 42.91 per cent, respectively in 2009-10 in rural areas. Similarly, in 1999-2000, work participation rate among Muslim women was recorded 15.67 per cent as against 24.6

per cent among women belonging to other minorities in urban areas while it was recorded 14.25 per cent among Muslim women and 27.02 per cent among women belonging to other minorities in 2009-10 in urban areas [28].

During 1999-2000, about 71 per cent Muslim women were found engaged in primary sector while only 7.91 per cent Muslim women were engaged in services sector in rural areas while 38.81 per cent Muslim women were found engaged in services sector and 49.41 per cent in secondary sector in urban areas during 1999-2000. The proportion of women belonging to other minorities engaged in services sector was recorded as high as 71.34 per cent in urban areas and only 7.68 per cent in rural areas. During 2009-10, 9.61 per cent Muslim women and 14.05 per cent women belonging to other minority communities were found engaged in tertiary sector in rural areas as against 33.95 per cent and 70.30 per cent Muslim and women belonging to other minority communities, respectively were found engaged in tertiary sector in urban areas. Women employment in secondary and services sector among women belonging to minority communities has increased in rural areas while it has decreased in urban areas during the period of 1999-2000 to 2009-2010 [1, 7].

Proportion of Muslim women as self employed has decreased in both rural and urban areas during 1999-2000 to 2009-10 while there has been significant increase in the proportion of self employed women belonging to other minority communities in both rural and urban areas during the corresponding period. During 1999-2000, 2.62 per cent Muslim women and 6.25 per cent women belonging to other minorities in rural areas and 18.03 per cent Muslim women and 53.71 per cent women belonging to other minority communities in urban areas were reported as regular employees. During 2009-10, the proportion of women as regular employees has significantly increased in rural areas however; it has slightly declined in urban areas for women belonging to other minority communities [12, 15].

Women belonging to Christian community are enjoying more autonomy and liberty in decision making process as compared to women belonging to other religious communities. Only 1/3rd Muslim women reported that they are participating in decision making related to their health care, household purchases and visiting to their families and relatives. About 21 per cent women belonging to Muslim community admitted that they are not participating in decision making while it was reported as low as 9.3 per cent among Buddhist women and 9.7 per cent among Christian women [12, 16].

Women access to money has been reported high among Jain women followed by Hindu and Buddhist women while it was recorded low among Sikh women. About 2/5th Jain women reported that they have their own bank accounts while it was recorded as low as 10.5 per cent among Muslim women. The awareness about micro credit Programmes has been recorded high among Christian women (60.4 per cent) followed by Jain women (45.4 per cent) and low among Muslim women (30.6 per cent). Only 1.2 per cent Buddhist women and 1 per cent Sikh women reported that they have taken loan under micro credit Programme. About 9 per cent Christian women admitted that they have received micro credit.

About half of the Jain women reported that they are enjoying freedom of movement while it was reported as low as 25.5 per cent in case of Muslim women. Women belonging to Jain, Buddhist and Christian community are enjoying more freedom of movement to market, health facility centre and outside of the community as compared to women belonging to other religious communities [13].

7. CONCLUSION

The status of minority women is reported worse than the status of women belonging to general communities and castes. Among the minority communities, the status of Muslim women has been reported low as compared to status of women belonging to other minority communities. It is to be noted that traditions, values and social system have direct bearing on the status of women belonging to minority communities. Poverty and backwardness has been reported high among Muslim, Sikh and Christians while Parsis, Jain and Buddhists are comparatively better off. There is imperative need to introduce a separate scheme for the empowerment of minority women rather than emphasizing on women leadership development as gender mainstreaming is more important rather than creating leaders among minority communities.

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