



सत्यमेव जयते
वन्दे मातरम्

ISSN 09739475

ATHARVA

A Monthly of Contemporary Studies & Analyses

Vol. 12, No. 5, May 1, 2017, Pages 24, Price ₹ 25/-

Contents

**STATUS OF MUSLIM WOMEN
SOCIAL REALITIES & RELIGIOUS NORMS
(Part-I)**

Dr. Pramod Pathak .../2

Editor, Publisher & Owner:

Dr. Pradip Narayan Maske
B3, Rajangan, Shantinagar, Ponda, Goa 403401

Mobile: +91-9423314925

Email Editor: atharvaeditor@hotmail.com

Email Publisher: atharvamonhly@gmail.com

Blogsit: www.atharvagoa.blogspot.com

Printer:

Sagar M. Bhat

Sahyadri Offset Systems, Corlim-Ilhas, Goa 403110

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Editor's Note

To be Muslim Indians or Indian Muslims is a dilemma faced by the Muslim community before and after Partition of India in 1947. In 1919 to 1924, Indian Muslims led agitations to draw the attention of the British imperialists to preserve the authority of Ottoman Empire and allow Sultan as Caliph of the Empire at the end of the World War-I. The Khilafat movement gave an opportunity to mobilize the Muslims in the British Empire and assert their pan-Islamist identity. Mahatma Gandhi lent support to Ali Brothers and their allies against British. The Muslim appeasement policy of the Indian National Congress back-fired, the Turkish nationalist themselves abolished 623-old Ottoman Empire in 1922 and the Caliphate in 1924.

The Khilafat movement, however, sowed the seeds of Pan-Islamism--- a political movement advocating unity among Muslims under one Islamic State with Islamic principles. The Indian Muslim identity took a back seat under the emergence of Mohamed Ali Jinnah leadership and demand for Pakistan on

communal lines gained currency. With one steno and a typist, Jinnah carved out Pakistan. Gandhi Ji could not prevent India's vivisection in 1947. No Congress leader was in mood to script any autobiographies in jail. Politicians and not Gandhiji failed India. He was 78 and Nehru was 58. Gandhiji was aloof from politics when the INC leaders (read J. Nehru) bargained Independence for Partition of the country.

The Muslim alienation is rooted in orthodoxy, backwardness and poverty. Development is a state-centric and not a people-centric process. The state-driven developmental process is basically divisive and works against the unity and integrity of the country. The Muslims have attempted to assert their political identity and ignored social, economic, educational and ethical issues afflicting them. The identification with invaders Ghazni to Aurangzeb in the past or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in the name of Pan-Islamism has alienated Muslims from the mainstream of the country. There is need for reforms within the Muslim society and not outside.

STATUS OF MUSLIM WOMEN SOCIAL REALITIES & RELIGIOUS NORMS (Part-I)

Dr. Pramod Pathak

(Satyam, Pundalik Nagar,
Parvari, Goa 403521,

drpvpathaak@yahoo.co.in)

[Short forms for references from the newspapers and magazines quoted:

The Hindu: TH;

The Indian Express:

TIE;

The Times of India: ToI;

Eastern Crescent: EC;

Holy Quran: HQ;

Sahih Al-Bukhari: SAB.]

It is to be noted that in most of the ancient and medieval world, men treated women folk as second rate human beings and did not treat them equals. In some cases women could inherit share of

father's wealth, in many others, once married, they lost their claim on parental wealth. They had to depend on the mercy of their parents and brothers to occasionally gain some gifts etc.

For the religious background dealing with the position of women in the Islamic society I will be drawing my references from HQ and Hadith translations. For Sahih Al-Bukhari (SAB) I will quote from "Summarized Sahih Al-Bukhari Arabic- English", translated by Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Islamic University, Al-Madina Al-Munawwarah, Darussalam Publishers, Riyadh (1996 edition). Other is "Al-Hadith: With Arabic text and English Translation and commentary of Mishkut-ul-Masabih" (AHMM) in 4 volumes, published by Islamic Book Service, New Delhi (2011). These 4 volumes are compilation of important Hadiths from different texts.

Discrimination from birth

Nothing is far from truth to claim that women are treated in Islam equal or even better than men. The discrimination against women starts from the child birth. It starts with offering sacrificial goat on birth of a new born child, Aqeeqa as it is called. Prophet was asked about Aqeeqa and he ordered **to sacrifice**

two sheep for a boy and one sheep for a girl and this is *sunna* (legal way of Aqeeqa) (SAB Pg 922). Even in the inheritance a lady begets only half the portion according to HQ. The Translation of the related *ayat* reads: “They ask thee for legal decision. Say: God directs (thus) about those who leave no descendants or ascendants as heirs. If it is a man that dies, leaving sister but no child, she shall have half the inheritance: if (such a deceased was) a woman, who left no child, her brother takes her (full) inheritance... if there are brothers and sisters, (they share), **the male child having twice the share of the female child**” (HQ 4. 176). In case of evidence, **witness of two women is equalled with one man** (HQ 2.282).

Even in heaven **a man gets two women as companions**: “(those entering heaven) every one of them shall have two wives, each of whom will be so beautiful, pure and transparent that the marrow of the bones of their legs will be seen through the flesh” (SAB pg 649). Obviously these will not be the mortal women folk from the earth, but the divine *houris* (HQ 44.54, 52.20). Thus on the religious level Islam has treated women half equivalent of men.

Violence against women

An *ayat* permits husband to beat wife: “As those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill conduct, admonish them (first), (next) refuse to share their beds, and last beat them (lightly)...” (HQ 4.34). It is to be noted here how translator's education and exposure to the modern ideas and milieu influenced translations of this *ayat*. Two Hindi /Urdu translators translate the last part as *unhe maro* hit them, whereas three English translations with a moderate attitude of the translators add a word in parenthesis as (lightly). Hardliner like Mawdudi plainly says “beat them”; Zafar Isaq Ansari translates it as “strike them” and lastly Mohammed Pickthal translated it as “scourge them” i.e. virtually whipping them. These translations of the holy Quran are acknowledged by the Muslim scholars to be authentic. The degree or intensity of punishment changes with translator's attitude distinguishing hardliner from moderate approach.

Muslim men frequently take recourse to the last alternative of beating wives. It is not that Hindu husbands do not indulge in it, they do. But I was surprised to read that Muslim men in Australia justified wife beating based on the Koranic

injunctions. It was attested by Joumanah el Matrah, the Lady Director of Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights. The news item giving her statement before the Australian Royal Commission had appeared in the July 1, 2015 issue of "The Australian". It was on wife battering, family violence and Muslim men in Australia justifying it as a privilege granted by religion. Things are no different in India.

Saudi Arabia where the very able and competent lady Hazarat Khadijah, the first faithful was born, wife thrashing, "scourging" as Pickthal translated, is a regular feature. As Ayaan Ali narrates, "Some Saudi women in our neighbourhood were regularly beaten by their husbands. You could hear them at night. Their screams resounded across the courtyard: "No! Please! By Allah!" This appalled my father. He saw this horrible, casual violence as a prime example of crudeness of the Saudis... (recognizing them) from (their voices) he (father) would mutter, "stupid bully, like all the Saudis." ("Infidel" by Ayan Hirsi Ali, published by Free Press, UK, 2007 edn. Page 47). Saudi women are still struggling to get some

common rights. They are struggling to get right to drive cars (The Hindu Oct 11, 2014.) Even in the land where women are supposed to have gained right to inherit and be treated well, the status of women in Saudi Arabia is that of a third rate human beings.

Violence against women has perpetuated since the beginning. A Hadith testifies stoning of a woman. An incident narrates a young man committing adultery with a married woman. His father went to inform Prophet about his son's adultery. Prophet ordered: "as far your son, he shall be given 100 strips and banishment for one year. As for you, O Onais, go to this man's wife. If she confesses, then stone her to death. Then she confessed, and so she was put to death" *agreed* (AHMM Vol 2, Pg 517). This incident is also attested in Al- Bukaahri: "Then the Prophet (Pubh) said, 'the son is for the bed (i.e. the man on whose bed he was born) and stones (despair, i.e. to be stoned to death) for one who has done illegal sexual intercourse" (SAB pg 465).

Well! Women were stoned to death in open as recent as 1970s in Saudi Arabia. As Ayaan writes, "it was a normal, routine thing: after a Friday noon prayer you could go home for lunch. Or you could go and watch

the executions. Hands were cut off. Men were flogged. Women were stoned. In late 1970s Saudi Arabia was booming, though the price of oil was tugging the country's economy into the modern world, its society seemed fixed in the Middle Ages" ("Infidel", Pg 43).

Some time back a woman was stoned to death in Indonesia. The picture of an Indonesian woman being flogged was published in the newspapers (Wall Street Journal Tuesday, April 3, 2007. As late as July 2014, ISIS jihadis in Iraq ordered genital mutilation of all women aged from 11 to 46 (TOI July 25, 2014).

The incidents of violence against women are regularly reported from the Muslim world. A pregnant woman named Farzana Iqbal, 25, was stoned to death because she had married a man she loved. Stoning occurred outside the Lahore High Court. Police remained mute spectators as stoning continued (TIE May 30, 2014). An incident from Afghanistan is more disturbing. A ten year girl who was brutally raped by a mullah was about to be killed by her family members as part of honour killing. Mullah was not held responsible. (TIE July 21,

2014). The families are more vengeful towards victims than the culprits who are men only. As recent as Oct 2015, on Male Island a woman was sentenced to death by stoning. However the higher court squashed the punishment. Inflicting such barbaric punishment is result of mediaeval mind set.

In India too, the status of Muslim women is no better than their counterparts in Islamic countries. Over the ages taking dowry from a bride has been in vogue among the Hindus. The same has been accepted among the Muslims. Many women are tortured to bring dowry from their parents and if the demand is not fulfilled, the lady is given talaq or is killed. A lady named Savitri married to a Muslim person. She was forced to get converted to Islam by her husband and her in-laws troubled her of dowry. She suspected that her husband had plans to sell her in West Asia. She filed complaints against her husband and in-laws (The Hindu Sept 24, 2014).

Talaq for quick separation is justified by the Deobandi school in an article elaborating the position of All India Muslim Personal Law Board states, "when serious discords develop in a marriage and husband wants to get rid of wife, legal compulsions and time

consuming judicial process ...in extreme cases (in which) husband may resort to illegal criminal ways of getting rid of her by murdering her. In such situations 'triple talaq' is a better recourse" (Eastern Crescent Oct. 2016, page 25). It is worth noting the wordings here. Husband's mindset is described as inclined towards getting rid of wife. It also ignores the root cause of discord as dowry demand from his family.

Every culture had some signs of good and bad omen. While Hindus treated appearance of a cat and a widow as bad omen, cats were treated as auspicious animal by the ancient Egyptians. There are bad omens in Islam too. "Narrated Abdullah bin Umar: I heard the Prophet (Pubh) saying 'Evil omen is in three things, the horse, the women and the house'" (SAB Pg 594). It indicates that women are considered bad omen, a degraded status. The reasons for branding women as bad omen are traced to their being lowly in the eyes of religious texts and laws and bound for hell hereafter.

Heavenly Discriminations

Allah or God or Ishavar has created men as well as women. It appears that He Allah created heaven exclusively for men.

There are many *ayats* in HQ narrating pleasures the believer menfolk will be enjoying in the heaven. For quite some time I was vexed by the question as to what happens to ladies or womenfolk in Islam after death. It was answered after I turned to the Hadith literature. They are all destined to go to hell. I give below the Hadiths as narrated:

Narrated by Abu Said Al-Khudri: Once Allah's Messenger (Pubh) went to the *Musalla* (to offer the Salat [prayer]) of Eid-al-Adha or Al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by the women and said, "O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire were you (women)." They asked, "Why is it so, O Allah's Messenger?" He replied, "You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you." Women asked, "O Allah's Messenger! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?" He said, "Is not the witness (evidence) of two women equal to the witness of one man?" They replied affirmative. He said, "This is the deficiency in your intelligence. Isn't it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?" The women replied in affirmative. He said,

“This is deficiency in your religion” (SAB pg 144).

Can any married couple having lived together for some years claim that they did not fight at all and that wife did not utter a single word against her husband? Difference in opinion between husband and wife is considered normal. All the normal women have to undergo menses. So they all will be relegated to hellfire. Looking at the rough proportion of male and female kids born to the human couples, majority of women in the hell clearly means that all of them have to go to the hell.

This majority of women in the hell are attested by another Hadith. “Narrated Imran bin Husain: The Prophet (Pubh) said, “I looked at Paradise and found poor people forming the majority of its inhabitants; and I looked at Hell and I saw that the majority of its inhabitants were women” (SAB pg 648). These are the divine visions of the Prophet. It turns out that Allah is concerned only with the male believer population and their life hereafter.

Women are denied any kind of spirituality. They cannot achieve perfection. With reference to the

ayats HQ 66.11-12 there is a Hadith narrated by Abu Musa: “Allah's messenger (Pubh) said, “Many amongst men reached (the level of) perfection but none amongst the women reached this level except Asia, Firaun's (Pharaoh's) wife and Maryam (Mary), the daughter of Imran” (SAB pg 675). This is in confirmation of other *ayat* 12.109 where it is clearly stated that Prophets sent by God were all men and not women. An extensive introduction to HQ in Marathi language explicitly states that only men were made Prophets *nabi*. God never selected ladies as Prophets (Marathi Translation of HQ by Abdul Jabbar Kuraishi et al (Voice of Quran publication, Mumbai, Pg 45). By all means women are rated wretched in Islam. While in Hindus there are many female saints, Christianity has beatified sainthood of many women, Islam doesn't appear to acknowledge women as spiritual beings. Women are all destined to go hell. That is why they are to be treated as bad omen.

Years ago I happened to talk to a Muslim professor of history at one conference. She confidently told me that every Muslim born including herself was destined to go to heaven. I asked her the secret. She told me that holy *ayats* from HQ are uttered in the ears of every new born

Muslim child. That very moment it becomes eligible for sitting in the company of Allah in heaven. Because Allah, the most merciful rewards even small good deeds and admits a Muslims in heaven. That time a Muslim smuggler was virtually ruling the underworld in Mumbai. I told her that I would not like to be admitted in a heaven where I will have to sit in the company of likes of the smuggler. Now I know that in Islam women have no place in heaven and confidence of the lady professor was misplaced. Utterances of HQ in the ears of a female child are of no use. That does not sanctify her hereafter. She is destined to go to hell only.

Entry in sanctum forbidden

Incidentally the *mazar* in my locality where the lecture of Mau. Ruhool Amin was held did not permit women folk to enter the inner sanctum. I saw those ladies urging menfolk to take the offerings inside to offer before the shrine. It is a sort of practising gender apartheid or untouchability. As reported, "It is a "grievous sin" as per Islam for women to be in close proximity of the grave of a male Muslim saint. The trust of one of Mumbai's iconic landmarks, the Haji Ali

Dargah raised this point in the Bombay High Court while defending its ban on women entering the shrine's inner sanctum (*mazaar*). A Mumbai based group working for the Muslim women from the lower strata had challenged the ban imposed on women from entering inner sanctum of shrine. Claiming gender discrimination, members of the group Dr. Noorjehan Niaz and Zakia Soman said that the restrictions were imposed sometime between March 2011 and June 2012 (TIE Oct 20, 2015). This is typical gender discrimination. Was it not a step backwards to medieval times in the twenty-first century? Or did these ladies belong to Ajlaf class? That will bring in yet another factor of division within the Muslim society of Ashrafs and Ajlafs as a social reality.

The Holy shrine of Kabah is no exception from this obscurantism. Qantaa Ahmad is an America trained doctor by profession. She went on assignment to serve at a hospital in Saudi Arabia. She writes, "In Aug 2006, Reuters reported on new limitations Saudi clerics wished to impose on women who were praying at the al-Haram. Interestingly, the al-Haram is one of the places where male and female

worshippers can intermingle. (Normally mosques are segregated with sections for male and female worshippers separated.) The clergy wanted to ban women from the immediate vicinity of Kabah.

Even within the conservative kingdom, this suggestion by the religious authorities has raised enormous ire, especially among the Saudi women activists. Correctly they accuse the theocracy of misogynistic discrimination." The all-male Haj committee has plans to bar women entering the central area of the sanctuary and plan to assign women to a remote area from where they could have a vantage of Kabah but not approach it ('In the Land of Invisible Women', by Qanta Ahmand 2008, Pg 176).

Women cannot be the Rulers

Muslim male cannot accept a lady as a ruler, even if she is elected by people. It was only in Pakistan and Bangladesh with the Hindu legacy that Benzir Bhutto in Pakistan and Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia could become Prime Ministers. When Pakistan lost its legacy and started honouring terrorists like Osama, Jawahiri and now Hafeez Sayeed as heroes with the active support from the Dictators like

Zia Ul-Haq and Parvez Musharraf that Benzir Bhutto fell to assassin's bullets. It was only in India that Raziya Saltana and Chandbibi could become rulers, although they faced the inevitable future of being betrayed and killed. Resistance to accept a lady ruler can be traced back to a Hadith. "When Allah's Messenger (Pubh) was informed that Persians had crowned the daughter of Kisra (Khushrau) as their ruler, he said, 'Such people as ruled by a lady will never be successful'" (SAB Pg 819). So the Muslim male community is reluctant to accept lady as a Ruler for the fear of being unsuccessful, even if the male rulers have often failed to deliver goods.

Enslaving women

Islam makes difference in women on the religious lines i.e. believer women - *muhasanaat* and nonbeliever women - *kafironki aurate* as the Hindi translation reads. Women taken as captives of war were treated like slaves. They are referred in HQ as those 'whom (your) right hand possesses'. They need not be treated with dignity and at the same time in the event of the slave women committing adultery, they are accorded half the punishment HQ 4.24, 25. About treatment of the captive women of nonbelievers Mawdudi has made

elaborating comments on HQ 4.24: “Although the Law has fixed the maximum number of wives at four, it has no limit with regard to the slave-girls. The Law does not lay down a limit in order to encourage people to accumulate huge armies of slave-girls. And thereby turn their homes into dens of sexual enjoyment. Rather the Law does not define the limit because the effects of war and total number of female captives that would have to be disposed of after a certain war are unpredictable.” It is very clear that for learned person like Maulana Mawdudi, who lived in 20th century there did not arise feeling of dignity towards non-believers' women - *kafironki aurate*. During the reign of Caliph Abu Bakr, Commander Khalid won many battles against Persians. It is recorded that during battle at Hira (May-June 633AD), at In Tamar (August 633AD), at Duma (September 633AD) and again at Duma (October-November 633AD), every time several hundred Persian ladies were captured and enslaved. What ISIS has done with Yazidi women and Boko Haram has done to the captive school girls. Male believers of these organisations can justify them on the basis of treatment given to the captive

women of the Banu Qurayzah, a Jewish tribe after Sa'd pronounced verdict (The Life of Mohammad by M. H. Haykal 1976 Pg 313) and other incidents quoted here. There is no envisioning of dignity for women folk in Muslim male psyche as a whole that modern day norms call for.

Ideal of a pious slave

A hadith is more stringent towards the intimate behaviour of a Muslim wife. Narrated by Abu Huraira: Allah's Messenger (Pubh) said, “If a husband calls his wife to his bed (i.e. to have sexual relation) and she refuses and causes him to sleep in anger, the angels will curse her till morning” (SAB pg 647). Which lady knowing this Hadith will ever deny her husband sexual favour for being cursed by angles all through night?

What is the ideal behaviour for a married woman? “A woman who is *baarri* (ideal married lady) is like a pious slave. She honours her husband's family and feeds them without question and complaint. She never whines or makes demands of any kind. She is strong in service, but her head is bowed. If her husband is cruel, if he rapes her and then taunts her about it, if he decided to take another wife, or beats her, she lowers her gaze and

hides her tears. And she works hard, faultlessly. She is devoted, welcoming, well trained work animal. This is *baarri*” (Infidel, Ayaan Hirsi Ali pg 12). Even if a woman is well trained, perfectly docile animal in human form, is she destined to the hell? This also points to the expectations of Muslim menfolk from the women folk in their family. On the spiritual level, how Allah will reward such a perfect *baarri* here on the earth and in life hereafter?

Denying Democratic rights

We live in the democracy today. However the old habits die hard. Women are not expected to play a role in the so called male bastion of politics. Recently municipal elections were held at Kolhapur in Maharashtra State. The Majlis-e-Shoora-Ulama-e-Shahar, Kolhapur is a committee of 40-50 clerics which controls mosques in the city. In the last week of September 2015, it distributed a note asking Muslim women not to contest the “un-Islamic” elections. However the order was denounced by the Hilal Committee, the apex body of Imams and Islamic scholars in the city, which said it goes against India's constitution and cannot be followed (TOI Oct 3, 2015).

Women were barred by elders from voting in a local election held on May 7 in lower Dir region in the conservative in north-western Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The Election Commission of Pakistan (EPC) which supervises the polls, after a meeting on June 2, cancelled the results and ordered re-polling in the constituency. “The by-election of Constituency of No PK 95 Lower Dir II is hereby declared void for the reasons of disenfranchisement of the female voters,” the EPC said in a statement (TIE June 4, 2015). There is a streak of light in the darkness around.

These incidents from India and Pakistan are to be judged on the background of the voting rights being given to Saudi women in the recent times. As back as September 2011, Saudi King Abdulla bin Abdulaziz al-Saud announced that Saudi women would be allowed to contest elections and vote (TOI Sept 26, 2011). Subsequently the Saudi women contested elections in the local bodies and voted also (TH Dec. 13, 2015). Even in Iran, lady parliamentarians, Mino Khaleghi and 17 others were elected to which president Rouhini twitted, “For the first time, 18 women MPs have made their way to the Majlis, which is a record, and we are happy that the dear ladies of our country are present

in all scenes and especially in politics (TIE May 16, 2016). It is pathetic see the Indian and Pakistani clerics overlooking the trend in Mecca and Tehran. They are adopting stubborn and discriminating attitude towards women.

Veiling of Muslim women

There was extensive debate in many Muslim countries over veil, hijab, burqa etc. for the Muslim womenfolk. Even the heavenly women are not free from a veil. A hadith narrates it. Narrated Anas bin Malik, "The Prophet (Pubh) said, 'If a woman (a houri etc.) from paradise appeared to the people on the earth, she would fill the space between heaven and the earth with the light and pleasant scent and her head cover is better than the world and whatever is in it.'" (SAB pg 582).

I have been really vexed by the questions regarding status of women in Islamic society. I had occasion to listen to Mau. Ruhool Amin on one occasion before a crowd of Muslims. He gave justifying analogy for observing veil by Muslim women. He said, "When we go to a market and fetch something, do we bring it open? We bring it covered in a bag. Do we bring *gosht* holding on

our palms in open? No, it is wrapped properly and in a bag. Look here is a *gosht* - meat of fifty kilos (i.e. ladies folk). Will you keep it exposed?" To this, the crowd applauded warmly *subhaan Allah! subhaan Allah!* I was aghast. Here a well-educated person was equating living human being, a mother, sister, daughter, wife with meat? Later on I sent a letter to Ruhool Amin asking him to justify his stand, to which he has not responded. What is the stand of learned Maulana Rahmani ji who responded to my questions posed above? Burqa or veil is a very crucial consideration in the Islamic culture. It is as if Islamic theology revolves around only veil for ladies folk, triple talaq and kafir hate.

Clock turning back

It appears that the clock is turning back for Islamic society and in particular for Muslim women. Margot Badran is a progressive lady Islamic thinker, academic and social activist from Egypt. After taking review of progressive steps adopted in 1970s, she views the current situation when the clock started turning back for Muslim women. She laments, "Meanwhile, Islamic fundamentalism continued to gain new adherents among the women, evidenced by the growing numbers of women wearing *hijab*. Islamic groups became increasingly active

on university campuses, spreading their message and actively recruiting. They were successful in appealing to large numbers of women, especially of the lower and middle class. Many of the new recruits were studying medicine and the sciences, who moreover tended to stay out of workforce after graduation” (‘Feminism in Islam’, by Margot Badran, 2011 edition, Pg 41). The things are no less different in India. There is steady rise in Muslim women wearing burqa and these days; even young girls as young as 5 years are seen donning black burqa.

Qanta Ahmad is very critical of the veil for the Islamic women strictly implemented in Saudi Arabia. She writes, “This veiling was anathema to me. Even with the deep understanding of Islam, I could not imagine mummification is what an enlightened, merciful God would ever have wished for half of all its creation. These shrouded, gagged silences rise into a shrieking register of muted laments for stillborn freedoms. Such enforced incarceration of womanhood is a form of female infanticide” (Qanta Ahmad, *op. cit.* Pg 35-36).

Some time back Vice-Chancellor

of the prestigious Aligarh Muslim University in India Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Zameer Uddin Shah castigated the fellow religionists. He expressed that Muslims lagged behind in the development race because they kept their women enslaved: “You have not utilised half of your population. Women remain enslaved. They remained inside home. Muslims have no one else to blame. You enslaved women and the result is you are enslaved.”

It will be interesting to recount my own interaction with a Mufti from a prestigious Islamic college from Bareilly in Utter Pradesh. It is also a centre for distant learning program run by IGNOU in India. As we discussed on many topics, topic of education of Muslim women came up. He was vehemently against female education. I asked him as to why he was opposed to education of women. He gave very startling answer: “As soon as these girls learn writing, they start writing love letters to boys. That is forbidden in Islam.” “Do you mean they should not be taught anything?” I asked. Mufti Saheb promptly replied: “Yes they should be taught tailoring, embroidery and such skills where they can exclusively deal with ladies and earn for their families.”

Incidentally his colleague who

actively participated in our dialogue gave me very important information. It is always said that Prophet Mohammad stopped the tradition of killing girl child, implying that it was rampant then all over Arabia. It was not so but was prevalent in only two tribes. The names of these tribes were Tabhim and Asad. I wanted proof. He showed me the book "Tarikh-e-Adab-a-Arabi" written by Ahamd Hasan Jarayat. The information was given in a footnote on Pg 8. The page of year of publication was missing. I appreciated him for he showed keen interest in research and writing. Although I could not read Urdu, both of them agreed on the names of the tribes as I wrote down. So the custom of killing of a female child is exaggerated by the Muslim male folk impressing on the women folk that Islam came to them as saviour and that they should remain indebted to the followers of Islam even if it amounts to enduring discrimination on several other accounts.

Gory practice of FGM

Less said the better it will be about the ghastly tradition of female genital mutilation (FGM) of Muslim women prevalent in many African countries. Ayyan gives

gory details of the inhuman way the vaginal mutilation is done, in her book "Infidel". Margot Badran has written an extensive paper "Body Politic(s): Women, Power and Sexuality in Egypt" on the Egyptian practice of FGM (Feminism in Islam, Pg 168-191). She refers to the incident of CNN airing a documentary of live performance of FGM. It created stir in the society. A task force was constituted to look into the gory tradition. "The task force took a firm stand against FGM in any form, demanding its full and immediate stoppage. Its 1997 position paper declared: "Our position regarding FGM is unconditional denunciation. It is based on a strong belief in a woman's right to maintain the integrity and wholeness of her body and the freedom of her mind; to choose her life and to base her choices on her own evaluation of what should or should not be done" (Badran *op. cit* Pg 176).

FGM results in depriving a lady of the very fundamental and natural right of feminine pleasures bestowed by nature. It violets her fundamental rights to live naturally. On the other hand these surgeries are conducted in such a crude manner that leaves behind scars on the minds and bodies of these women. As reported in the newspapers of

25th July 2014 ISIS had declared a *fatwa* that all the female folk within the region under their control and belonging to the age group of 16 to 46 years should undergo FGM. The terrorist organization which uses the most modern technology for waging war and media to spread the message of radicalization of youth and receives young women volunteers from European countries and Australia to produce progeny for them, is rooted in mediaeval mind set in respect of women. It will not be out of context here to point to the execution of two civilian women by ISIS on the accusations of “sorcery” in Syria by beheading them in Deir Ezzor Province done publically (The Hindu July 1, 2015). It is the typical misogynist approach of the ISIS leadership which claims to draw its basis for heinous crimes from the religious texts.

The practice of FGM can be traced back to the pre-Islamic times. Advent of Islam did not result into its discontinuation. As Shereen El Feki writes, “The practice is considered obligatory for Muslims. Gad al Haq [former head of Al-Azhar, Egypt] said that girls should be circumcised, and I believe and trust him.” Magda (an

operating maid whom Shereen interviewed) invoked an oft-cited hadith in which Prophet Mohammad is said to have advised a woman in Medina who performed female circumcision: “Do not cut too severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband”. However, there is a considerable debate around the meaning and authority of this hadith none of which shakes the two women's (conducting FGM) belief. ('Sex and Citadel' by Shereen El Feki, 2013, Pg 106-7).

Muslim women living in Europe and UK force their young daughters to undergo FGM. Wherever it is not officially allowed, they take their daughters to the country of origin they get it done surreptitiously.

Recently Nigeria has banned FGM. According to UNICEF almost two Crore Nigerian women in the age group of 1-49 years had to undergo this sexually debilitating atrocity. The outgoing President Goodluck Jonathan got this resolution passed under The Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015. Earlier Egypt had banned it about seven years ago. It is expected that many other countries including Liberia, Sudan, Male are expected to follow the suit (News item on June 9, 2015).

Fortunately it is not practised among the majority of the Indian Muslims. The only sect of Daudi Bohras practise it. Some months back, ladies from this community had come out in open against this custom and circulated appeal and conducted email support campaign demanding ban on FGM. It is difficult to anticipate here whether radicalisation of Indian youth can change their mind set to accept that heinous practice in future as a religious obligation. That will be darkest day for the Indian womanhood.

Women's degraded status: post-Islam?

What I write below will be difficult to accept for many or most of the people in the Muslim community. I will not be referring to any non-Muslim authors, because they can be branded with anti-Muslim bias or as it is common with Europeans, with Islamophobia. I will refer to the data and information endorsed by the Muslim writers. I once again state that these are my views "with malice towards none, one and all". I am of the opinion that advent of Islam led to degradation of women's status all over the countries converted to Islamic

faith. Although the topic is very extensive, I will state only a few observations and sincerely welcome comments or explanations from learned Muslim scholars.

The very first example of a liberated woman that comes to my mind is that of Hazarat Khadija. She was running a business. She only selected young Mohammad to go on a business trip. Later on she asked for his hand. I have not come across any statement that she put somebody as mediator for that. She talked to Uncle Abu Talib of the Prophet who was like father to him. Later on but for her firm stand, Prophet would have faced lot of personal difficulties in getting convinced of his own Prophethood. She did not brush aside the divine messages Prophet Mohammad received as hallucinations. She commanded lot of respect from the people of Makkah. Till she and Uncle Abu Talib were alive, none in Makkah dared to touch Prophet. Had the status of women in pre-Islamic society been low, Haz. Khadija could not have accomplished all the above things.

During the pre-Islamic period, women used to accompany men to battle fields. In the life of Prophet Mohammad there appears a lady character almost like a lady villain.

Her name was Hind. She was wife of Abu Sufyan. Her brother and father both were killed in the battle of Badr by Hamzah, uncle of Prophet Mohammad. She refused to mourn over their death. "No, by God, I shall not mourn them publically until I have avenged them. Fat and perfume shall be forbidden to me until I have defeated the enemy" ('Life of Muhammad' by M. H. Haykal Pg 241). Hind attributed the defeat at Badr to the absence of women to arouse their men to sufficient self-exertion in battle. Her short speech sealed argument and the Quraysh began to march against Muhammad together with the women who were led by the most resentful women of all. (Haykal pg 254). During the battle of Uhud that followed, Makkans won the battle. Killer of her father, Hamzah - uncle of Prophet Mohammad was killed. Hind opened his liver and chewed it. As she swore, she avenged death of her brother and father.

In life of Prophet Mohammad, he had to face nuptial denial from a captivated lady as narrated in a Hadith. This Hadith is narrated Haz. Aisha and further elaborated by Abu Usaid. "Jaunia (a lady from Banu Jaun tribe) was brought along with her wet nurse

(as a bride for the Prophet). When the Prophet entered upon her, and said to her, "Give me yourself (in marriage) as a gift." She said, "Can a princess give herself in marriage to an ordinary man?" The Prophet raised his hand to pat her so that she might become tranquil (as she did not know He was Allah's Messenger). She said, "I seek refuge with Allah from you." He said, "You have sought refuge with One Who gives refuge." Then the Prophet come out to us and said, "O Abu Usaid! Given her two white linen dresses to wear and let her go back to her family (i.e. she is divorced). (Sahih Al-Bukhari 7:182).

There were other warrior ladies in the region. They fought battles with the later Caliphs. One such was Umm Jummal. Her mother was put to death by Prophet. She was enslaved and later freed. She belonged to the tribe of Fajra. During the reign of the first Caliph Abu Bakr she gathered a few tribes together and under her leadership waged war against Muslim forces.

Banu Tamim tribe was converted to Islam in presence of Prophet Mohammad. Later on a fraction of the tribe rose against Abu Bakr and reverted back to their previous faith. They waged war against Islam. They were led by a lady Sajjah who

was orator, very popular among her tribe and declared herself as Prophetess. Her leadership as prophetess was accepted by her tribe, whereas Prophet Mohammad commanded that women shall not become prophet at all. So was the old tradition among the Jews. Accepting her prophethood by her tribe confirmed that women commanded great respect in her tribe.

The tradition of women accompanying Muslim army continued even during the time of the First Caliph Abu Bakr. One of the ablest Commander of Muslim army in early years of Caliphate, Khalid was accompanied by contingent of women during his campaign to Syria. The battle of Ajnadayn is remembered in the Islamic history as war of ladies. At some point the Roman army defeated a contingent of the Islamic army in a sudden attack. They took many Muslim women captive and lodged them in tents. Those ladies did not give up. They gathered courage and started beating the Roman soldiers on guard. As they continued their resistance, there appeared Khalid's army and the battle took the turn in favour of the captive ladies. During the following battle

Khalid formed two separate contingents of ladies encouraging Muslim army to fight with determination.

Apart from leading armies on the battle field, ladies in Saudi Arabia and in Yemen were composers of patriotic poems. The ladies participated in poetry competitions held in Makkah. Some of them openly opposed the Prophet. One such lady "Asma, daughter of Marwan, of the tribe of banu Umayyah ibn Zayd, used to insult Islam and the Prophet by encouraging bad feelings against Muslims. The battle of Badr (won by Muslims) did not make her reconsider. One day, Umayr ibn Awf attacked her during night while she was surrounded by her children, one of whom she was nursing. Umayr was weak of sight and had to grope for her. After removing the child from his victim, he killed her; he then proceeded to the Prophet and informed him of what he had done" (Haykal pg 243). A few years after during takeover of Makkah, a lady Fartana who used to castigate Prophet Mohammad in song was executed along with her master Abdullah bin Khatal (Haykal pg 410).

In the post-Prophet period during campaign in Yemen around 633 AD,

two poetesses were known to oppose Islam and Prophet Mohammad. They composed denigrating compositions.

There were women who accepted Islam and Prophethood of Mohammad and stood firm. Hazrat Umme Salim was a lady who accepted to marry Hazrat Abu Talha only after he accepted Islam. In the battle of Honain, when the battlefield was hot and raging with conflict, Hazrat Umme Salim drew out a long knife to kill any unbeliever who came her way (Women Companion of the Holy Prophet, Islamic Book Service, (2003), Pg 225).

Many such women made impact on the society in those days. Records of their daring deeds are long. The point to be emphasised here is that women claimed high status in the pre-Islamic society. They lost their voice in society as well as in family after the advent of Islam. Islamic society became highly misogynist society like many others in the contemporary world. The statement will be difficult for the present day Muslims in general and especially the Mullahdom to digest. Position of women in the Islamic society subsequently deteriorated to such

an extent that a lady could leave house only on three occasions i.e. when she married and conducted to the house of her bridegroom, on the death of her parents, and when she goes to her own grave (*History of Arab people* by Albert Hourani, (1991)Pg 120).

By quoting assorted passages from scriptures about the high status of women in Islamic society will not serve the purpose. I think Muslim scholars and common people will have to reassess their stand on the status of women and undertake self-inquiry-*ijatehad* on how to accept their status as human beings and further elevate it that they get esteem from the male Muslim community.

[About the author:

Dr. Pramod Pathak is M. Tech. (Chemical Engg) I.I.T. Mumbai and Ph. D. in the Vedic literature from Mumbai University. He worked as a Chemical Process Engineer and Renewable Energy Expert. He is a prolific writer and freelance journalist. He contributes regularly to the newspapers and magazines. Currently, he is based in Goa.]
