

ASSAMESE MUSLIM WOMEN: HISTORY, INTERPRETATION AND CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

The Muslims of Assam have been playing a very significant and positive role in the formation and development of the Assamese society. Muslims first encountered the Brahmaputra valley in 1206 during the invasion led by Bakhtiar Khilji. A number of Muslims who came to this valley married to local women and along with them, some aboriginal Hindus become Muslim by proselytization. Therefore, their language, culture and social way of life were assimilated with Assamese Society. Though the history of the Assamese Muslim Women is rare to found and historians were remain silent about it, but whatever the historians were written about the Assamese Muslim culture from that we can understand that the social life of the Muslim women was as like as the other Assamese women. Now from few decades we can observe that the life style of the Assamese Muslim women has gradually changed. The religious criteria for defining the changing social life of the Muslim women entails certain fundamental difficulties concerning the identification of the mass of people whom in spite of certain commonness, encompass considerable diversities. It is therefore necessary to understand the change in the light of historical analysis.

KEYWORDS: Proselytization, Encompass

INTRODUCTION

The study of transformation or social changes has great significance in the history of society and culture. Changing social life in course of time is a natural phenomenon. Human society has a natural tendency to change. Though it is a natural phenomena happens in course of time but the changes take place in the society is not happen for only an isolated factor. Various factors and several circumstances can be attributed to it. In some societies, changes are rapid while slow in some others. The systematic construction or evolution of various social institutions and forms of structure like family village, community etc. marks changes in society. Social changes may refer to the notion of social progress or socio-cultural evolution. To study the changes in a society some integrated approaches relating to the society is necessary. Alterations in the properties of social system through time constitute the focus of social dynamics.¹ In the context of Assamese Muslim society some visible changes occurs due to some invisible factors. However, these factors are created indirectly but it paved the way to changes.

In recent times, two contradictory changes can be visible in the Assamese Muslim society. First one is emphasise on modern attitudes and practice whereas the other towards the fundamental trend, which tries to idealise the period of the Prophet (PBUH). The second trend of change is highly affected to the women. This is not confined to the Assamese society alone but in every Muslim society throughout the world. The violent image in the eyes of many Muslims is a distortion by the western media. Media execute the situation by filling a layer of discursive reaction, which make a suspicious attitude towards the whole community. There are two contradictory notions evolving around the world due to modern media and

¹ Moore, Wilbert E: "Social Change" Englewood Cliffs New Jersey 1963. p-24

the first one try to turn Muslim world into another enemy whereas the other one within the Islam who advocate confrontation with non-Muslim, specially the western world.² These circumstances led towards the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. The global Islamic terrorism made a suspicious the attitude of the non-Muslims towards the Muslims and this attitude grew stronger after the United States of America attack in September 11, 2001. The main cause of the growth of this type of circumstances was western attitude towards Muslims from the very beginning. Islamic society throughout the world is finding difficulty to adjust with modernisation due their negative feelings towards the western world. The same condition was reflecting in the context of Indian Muslims.

The Muslim rulers had ruled over the Indian sub-continent before the British rulers came to India. The domination of the Muslims over India was squeeze out by the British after 1757. The impact of the British dominance, as exemplified by the destruction of the court life of the Mughals in Delhi in 1857, precipitated Indian Muslims into various reactions.³ So in the initial stages, Muslims attitude towards British and western culture was not positive. The confusing reaction of the Muslims towards the British was illustrated by the founding of the new *Madrassa at Deoband*, which was intended to give strength to the insecure Muslim community at the local level by training religious leaders.⁴ They gave no response towards western education. They kept themselves within Islamic culture. They gave more emphasis on revivalism of Islamic culture. The book *Behesti Zewar* was widely read over the last century and is still highly regarded. This book emphasise on Islamic rules and regulations. At that time Muslim population focusing upon, how Islamic identity defined or described.⁵ Therefore, for a long period the Muslims are remaining uneducated. An elite section of Muslim people realised in nineteenth century that Hindus are more educated then Muslims and they got benefited by the Britishers and Muslims were remain backward. A number of Muslim people jumped into the competition with the Hindus without understanding the social conditions. In Bengal, among the Muslims, a transitional movement had started and this movement was known as *faraizis*. The message of this movement was one of religious purification by return to the obligatory duties of Islam. In a multi-religious society like India, the drive to establish or re-establish a purified form of religion led inevitably to the rejection of behaviour and beliefs attributed to other religions. This event has led to confusion and chaos in Islamic society and resulted in the growth of fundamentalist idea of separate identity, separate state theory and terrorism.

Another important impact of the changing social life of Muslim Women in India was Legal Modernisation. The Shah Banu's case stretches a great stroke on Indian Muslim women. The judgement of Supreme Court in favour of Muslim women and the enactment of 1986 Act (Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Divorce Act) by govt of India for dissolved the Supreme Court Judgement. The Congress Government confusedly enacted the 1986 Act, in the election year, under the heavy pressure of orthodoxy. The most controversial provision of the Act was the it gave a Muslim the right to maintenance for the period of *iddat* (about three months) after the divorce, and shifted the responsibility of maintaining her to her relatives or the Wakf Board. Afterwards, in the Danial Latifi case, the Supreme Court creatively interpreted the Act and sustained the Shah Bano case. Since then, maintenance has been granted to Muslim divorcees beyond the *Iddat* period. This research will cover the present sketch of legal system, requirement of union civil code and people's response towards it.

² Malise Ruthven: *Islam A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press 2006, pp-1-2

³ Sheila McDonough "Muslim Women in India" ed. Arvind Sharma "Women in Indian Religions", New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004. P-166

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Justine Jones: "Local Experience of Reformists in a 'Muslim' Town in Colonial India: The Case of Amroha" *Modern Asian Studies* Vol 43, No 4. Cambridge University Press. www.jstor.org/stable/40284914

The question of legalisation of women maintenance after divorce and the involvement of Indian politics led to tremendous impact on the Indian Muslim women.

In the context of Assamese Muslim society, the question is different because the Muslims of Assam especially in Sivasagar was so long liberal in character because the maximum Muslims of Sivasagar District were converted into Islam during the time of Muslim invasion. They were very cultured and much assimilated with the Assamese culture. Nevertheless, from the few decades the culture of Assamese Muslim had changed. Assamese Muslims are changing their attitude towards the traditional customs. They tried to move out from the traditional Assamese way of life. The question is that why these changes occurs after a long time? Whether these changes are happens in the society due to the process of accepting global Islamic trend? Why this trend is popular and assertive in contemporary period? Whether it is, a global phenomena or it is due to some internal problems within the society?. Whether the issue of immigration have an impact on the overall attitude of the Muslims? or whether the execution of the media misleads the people? And how far the legal modernisation put remarkable impact on the change.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology is an important part of social research. Primary as well as secondary sources are undertaken for this research purpose. Quran and Had is were taken as a source to convey the basic ideas of Islam.

The work is based on following methodologies

- Field Work
- Interview Schedule
- Content Analysis

FIELD WORK

The field work has been undertaken to collect the information of social as well as domestic life of women in Sivasagar and various culture prevalent among the women of Sivasagar.

VERBAL INTERVIEW AND WRITTEN SCHEDULE

Verbal interview and a written schedule was prepared by interviewing some elderly ladies and written schedule had been given to some literate and cultured personalities of Sivasagar and the other parts of Assam to explore the view on the issue of changes and for the purpose of this research. In order to examine the gradual change of Assamese Muslim women social life an extensive interview was constructed.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Source materials preserved in the different libraries and institutions have been consulted. Articles, reports which were related to Islam, Muslim society and Assamese Muslim society have also been analysed.

ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND RESULTS OF THE SUBJECT MATTER

Women are the backbone of any society inclusive of the Muslim society. They are the one who play a great role in moulding the future generation. The women social way of life can be determined through various economic, social, religious, cultural factors as well as political system that prevails in the society. On the basis of the research, probably it is

a bit too strong to say that, the new elements of the society, in all spheres, denigrates women, but it certainly does not elevate them. They have to do religious duties at the same time they have to do family or domestic duties and those who were educated and doing job, they have to do academic duties also. The women whose husband's goes to the Shilla for 40 days or several days or in *Tabliqui Jamat* their wives become the single guardian of the family. The women who were come into the influence of the *Tabliqui Jamat* they themselves observed this things happily. The gradual change shows that women have do extra works and it makes women overburden. Sometimes-communal circumstances led to changing social life, who sowing seeds of communalism are not the matter but this type of elements make complicated the way of life of Women. This research shows that change occur in the Assamese Muslim society into two dimensions.

In the first part, of the study shows that how the Muslim people are scattered in the different parts of the Sivasagar district and how they adopted Assamese culture and way of life. How they recognised themselves as Assamese. Ajijur Rahman (first Muslim graduate from Nazira) ancestors were Kaivarta and converted into Islam. Moidul Islam Bora was belongs to Rupohi D-Dhora Family. Musfika Zaman daughter-in-law of Fatima Zaman was belongs to Khanikar Barua family. At present they lived in Rajoi of Jorhat district. Shah Hussain Khan and Ramjan Khan held the post of *Hilaidari Barua* or the officer commending in the artillery forces of the Ahom army. At present some descendent of *Hilaidari Barua* family are lived in Sivasagar Meteka-Amguri and Na-Ali.

Muslim ladies of sivasagar have still retained their skill in artistic weaving. In this regard the name of Babie Begum is mentionable. At her young age it means around 1940s -50s, every women were very much skilled in weaving and there was joint family on that time so all women in a family together involved in weaving by helping each other. But at present women are not skilled in weaving even they don't know how to weaving. In the season of festivals wife gifted her husband by spinning and weaving clothes and keep him happy by this way. Here one more point to be noted one that women around 1970s-90s, had known a little about tailoring but today's girls don't have skill in tailoring also. Till 1970s, Muslim family of Sivasagar had *taat haal*, *dheki* etc. but from few decades these things were not seen in Assamese Muslim in Sivasagar. It shows that how the Assamese culture of weaving and spinning was gradually declined from the scenerio of Assamese Muslim Women. Before the recruitment in ONGC instead of large scale of land requisition until 1980s, the role of wives was different. However, after the large number of recruitment in ONGC the role wives became changed. Before it they have to help their husband in farming for their livelihood. They even help their husbands in economic activities. They woke up early in the morning sound of *Fazaar Azaan* and offer *Fazaar Namaaz* and then started working for the whole day. Oral history shows that under the first part of the study period Assamese Muslims greeted their mother as *Aai*, *Bouti*, *Maa*, *Mai*. However, later the people used to greet the mother as *Maajaan*, *Ammajaan*, *Amu*, *Amujaan* etc. Instead of *Aai*, *Bouti* etc. (and they gradually used to greet their grandmother both maternal and paternal as *Aai*, *Aaijaan* etc. Later on *Dadi* and *Nani* replaced it also.).

In the first 30 years of the study period shows that Muslim women of Assam were very assimilated and they started their foot step towards education. Every Muslim parents around 1950s to 70s send their daughter to mosque or *moktub* to acquire Islamic knowledge but they afraid to send them to school or colleges for formal education because, at that time school and colleges were far from their houses. It was during 1970s or 80s formal education become integral part of Muslim life in Sivasagar. The importance of education of women was realised by educated Muslims in Sivasagar. This research find out that Maulana Syed Kazi Ajijur Rahman of Dhai-Ali established Girls M.E. Madrassa in 1922 for girl education later which become 4 no Dhai-Ali Balika Parthamik Vidyalay. Joshna Begum's father was gave very much

concentration in education of girl child. Education in former time was depend on the economic condition of the family. System of early marriages, dependence on husband and led very much emphasis on house hold duties were the major impediments in getting women education. But from 1980s it was not staying in such circumstances, every Muslim person of the society in Sivasagar came to realise that with religious education, formal education also become very much important to survive in the society and to walk step by step with other neighbouring Hindu people.

CONCLUSIONS

From 1980s the way of life has change, some women leaning towards modernisation. They adopted modern customs and modern way of life. in this case watching television and keeping housemaids by the ONGC workers was one of the major cause. It was approximately 1980s salwar was prevalent among the Assamese Muslim Women of Sivasagar, and gradually it become popular among Muslims of Sivasagar and later the married women also used to wear salwar.

It has been observed in this work that in recent times the married women have to face major problems. While in modern times whether educated or uneducated parents never imposed any restriction on daughter's education, they even give more emphasis on the education of the daughters. Parents also encouraged their daughters to go for a job. They never compelled their daughters to observe 'Purdah' or any kind of Burkha or Hijab. As a whole, the position of daughter in the family have improved. However, after marriage the whole situation changed. Their personal is life determined by their husbands. They have to obey their husbands and so on. They have to observe Purdah, Burkha, or whatever their husbands chose. The main problem is that the men thought that Muslim married women must have an identity as married women like the Hindu married women. A Hindu married woman can be recognized based on their mekhela chadar and *Sindoor*. However, it is difficult to recognize the Muslim women as married women. Therefore, to show her identity as a married woman, she must observe Purdah or veiling herself.

The problem of identity is not confined to the women alone but in every aspect of their life. After observing the whole situation, one can interpret that *tabliqui jamat* include men of all ages. Some young boys entered into such kind of missionary activities, to stay out from the family responsibilities and heavy pressure of parents on their career. For this purpose, they go from place to place with elderly persons without understanding the main tenets of the religion. They acquire a little knowledge about the society and they have started a movement of revivalism because they thought that they were helpless without their Muslim brothers. To unite the Muslims and to include them under one umbrella, they even include the immigrants and establish a separate Muslim identity. Therefore, they tried their best attempt to mobilise women into the Seventh-Eighth century Arabian culture. They even adopted a reactionary attitude towards Hindus and make strong efforts to win firstly, the women of their family or neighbours to their ideology because women are superstitious, tradition-bound and fatalist.

This type of reactionary attitude of the Muslims does not come from Tabliqui Jamat or involvement of uneducated people into Tabliqui Jamat alone; it has come from the process of communalizing the situation of Assam by the politicians or the distortion of media by sowing seeds of disunity. It has changed the attitude of the people towards each other and it led to changes in the social life of the Assamese Muslims. One point to note is for their present condition in the society, women themselves are also responsible. They must have an interest in going for higher education like legal education, medical, engineering courses which would go a long way in improving their present status in the society.

On the basis of the work, it is not completely true that the new elements of the society, denigrates the women in all spheres, but it certainly does not elevate them. They have to perform religious duties and at the same time have to be busy with family or domestic duties and those who were educated and employed, they have to be involved in academic duties also. The women whose husband's goes to the *Shilla* for 40 days or several days or in *Tabliqui Jamat*, their wives become the single guardian of the family. The women who comes under the influence of the *Tabliqui Jamat*, observed these things happily. In the present day, a modern rich educated and at the same time religious Muslim women of Sivasagar district do not confine themselves to the four walls of her house. She has many duties to perform outside her home. She has to do regular shopping, escort her children to school, attend academic jobs and at the same time, she has to fulfil religious obligations. The gradual change shows that women have to do extra works and these overburdens them.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX –A

- NAME OF THE RESPONDENT:
- AGE:
- SEX:
- CASTE:
- MARITAL STATUS: MARRIED/UNMARRIED
- EDUCATIONAL STATUS:
- OCCUPATION:
- DATE:
- TIME:
- NAME OF THE PLACE:

APPENDIX –B

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Describe your family background.
2. Tell me some important events of your life.
3. What type of role you have played in the society?
4. What type of bonding you have with your male/female family members?
5. How is your relation with your In-Laws?
6. What is your perception towards other religion?
7. How do you look towards ideas of modernisation and westernisation?
8. What changes you have observed in the Assamese Muslim society since the last three decades?
9. Do you support the Burqa system among the Assamese Muslim women?

10. What is your view towards widow remarriage? Do you think widow remarriage is accepted by the Assamese Muslims?
11. Do you support the role of *Tabliqui Jamat* in the context of Assamese Muslim women?
12. Do you think Assamese Muslim women have become victims or overburdened by this change?

