

Authors affiliation

Assistant Professor, Dept. of
History, Raja N.L. Khan Women's
College, Midnapore, India.

Reprints requests

Mita Biswas, Assistant Professor,
Dept. of History, Raja N.L. Khan
Women's College, Midnapore, West
Bengal- 721102 India.

Email: mitabiswasdas@gmail.com

Social Customs of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal

Mita Biswas

Abstract

Background: Muslim political power penetrated into including Eastern India Bengal towards the beginning of 13th century A.D. Since then the Muslim Power extended to other parts ultimately covering the whole of Bengal and the Bengal remained under the Muslim rule till English East India Company established its authority, in the latter half of 18th century. Their economic & political condition was affected by permanent settlement of 1793 when many Muslim landlords lost their estates. *Methodology:* The method used in this study has been drawn from those favored in pure historical research as well as other disciplines. As the purpose here was to recreate a period of social-cultural history, a multidisciplinary approach was deemed more appropriate. *Result:* Muslim Society and especially for Muslim women in 19th Century was a juncture. In this time social crisis occurred and the effect of this crisis was the social condition of Muslim Women had been changed. But in the colonial period Muslim society had own custom. The effect of this customs on Muslim women had not well in every time. 'Azaan', 'Purdah', 'Polygamy' were the important custom of Muslim Society in 19th Century. *Conclusion:* A glance at the period of four decades (1900-1939) reveals that significant changes occurred in the institution of the family, its structures and ideology. The entire framework of the Muslim family was transformed under the impact of new socio-economic changes and the rise of a new domestic ideology that accompanied them.

Keywords: Colonial Period; Muslim society; Bengal; Polygamy; Marriage; Child Marriage; Custom.

Introduction

Muslim political power penetrated into including Eastern India Bengal towards the beginning of 13th century A.D. A Muslim kingdom was established in Bengal with Lakhnauti (Gaur) as capital by Muhammad Bakhtyar Khalji in early part of 1205 A.D. Since then the Muslim Power extended to other parts ultimately covering the whole of Bengal and the Bengal remained under the Muslim rule till English East India Company established its authority, in the latter half of 18th century [1].

In the Colonial Period basically beginning of the

19th century Bengali Muslim had already lost their all political power. Their economic condition had been affected by this new political situation. All of sudden they found that almost all government posts were out of their reach. Their economic condition was further affected by permanent Settlement of 1793 when many Muslim landlords lost their estates [2]. In 1837, when introduction of English as the official language of the East India Company Government barred the Persian and Arabic educated Bengali Muslim gentry from all government post [3]. We find Bengali Muslim in an utterly desolate condition towards the beginning of 19th century. As a matter of fact Muslim all over India subcontinent was suffering

from depression, frustration and futile pride for their past glories. The loss of political power, economic decadence, an alienated culture and education system gradually superimposed over the older one made the Indian Muslims of this period inward looking, seeking solace in self pride in past tradition and religious precepts [2].

The women question in the latter half of the nineteenth century had to be formulated in a society where the process of modernization was subverted by colonization which had disrupted the political, economic and cultural reality of India. The change had occurred earliest in Bengal which was the first foothold of the British. Changes introduced in the economic infrastructure through the introduction of landownership, commercial agricultural and new form of business enterprises, were accompanied by transformation of the legal and educational system, and a dislocation of cultural patterns [4].

By 1790 the legal system had been reformed, through selectively. English law replaced indigenous religious and customary law in criminal cases, but family laws were left untouched [5]. Before Colonial Period Muslim social life was controlling by their own customs and tradition. But at the time of colonial period the law of British Parliament gradually interfere their social life. So all Customs had been affected and changed. 'Patna Cause' was an example [6]. The 'Patna Cause' originated in a dispute over inheritance. British Parliament interfere this case. Shabaz Beg Khan was a revenue collector of several regions of Bihar, paying revenues to the Naib Diwan of Patna, Shitab Roy and later to Company Provincial Council [7]. After his death Khan's widow and nephew Behadur Beg took his claim to the inheritance to the Company's Provincial council at Patna, alleging that he was the rightful heir to the estate by adoption. Patna Provincial Diwani Adalat referred his complaint to the 'qazi' and 'mufties' attached to adalat. The 'qazi' and 'mufties' then decided on right of inheritance that according to Muslim law would be three fourth to Behadur Beg and one fourth to Begam. The Begam, on the other hand, claiming full inheritance by virtue of a deed of gift. Her next move was to go to Calcutta to issue plaint to the Supreme Court against Behadur Beg, 'qazi' and 'mufties', alleging, assault, battery and false imprisonment [6]. On 3rd February, the Chief justice issued a long and complex judgment in which he upheld the claims of the Patna widow, castigated the action of the company's Provincial Council and the Muslim law officers, and awarded damages against them of Rs.30000 with Rs.9208 cost. Behadur Beg, 'qazi' and 'mufties' were arrested and imprisoned [8].

So, till date conflict of Muslim inheritance property related matter justified by their own customs. But in colonial period this conflict had been justified by the law of British Parliament.

Methodology

The method used in this study has been drawn from those favored in pure historical research as well as other disciplines. As the purpose here was to recreate a period of social-cultural history, a multidisciplinary approach was deemed more appropriate. Primary documents comprised of contemporary periodicals and journals, non-fictional literature and fictional literature, as well as religious text and manuals in use at the time. Of these, the first, periodicals and journals have been used most extensively in this study. Archival matter (institutional records and government document) were another primary source, though dependence on them has not been preponderant [4].

A source that was considered significant for this study was interviews or the recording of oral history, as well as memories and private papers such as letters and diaries.

Some of the semi-religious semi-behavioral manuals advocating ideal role models for women were very popular in the period under review. They have not been analyzed before in any historical study on Bengali Muslim Women. In the present work, such manuals have been extensively consulted and found to be a veritable source of information.

Results and Discussion

In the colonial period Muslim society had its own customs. The effect of this customs on Muslim women had not well in every time. In born they were neglected. 'Azaan' was one of the religious customs of Muslim society which is compulsory when male child born. But many families did not bother to herald the birth of female child with the 'Azaan'. Ibrahim Khan wrote a story about the birth of girl child, there was no harm in the birth of sons one after another, but the birth of consecutive daughters resulted in displeasure manifesting itself in negative names such as 'Chhutiwali', 'Pochi', etc. In a nearby village a woman after giving birth to four daughters was pregnant again. Her husband had threatened her that if she gave birth to female child again he would divorce her and cut off her nose. When a daughter was born again, the mother prepared to leave rather than be divorced [9].

In Bengal, a child would usually be born in a separate room, termed variously as *shutika griha* or *atur ghar*. This tradition was also practiced by many Muslim families [10]. In most cases, this would not have to be a spatially separate room or hut built specifically for the purpose as in case of Hindu women. Though urban families did not emphasize a separate *aturghar* (labor room), the practice was prevalent in rural society [11]. The official records as depicted in censuses and statistical accounts refer to similar practices in both communities. One

contemporary recorded James Wise's observation on child birth practices in 1873 that when a women either Hindu or Muhammadan, approaches the term of her pregnancy, an outhouse or detached room is prepared for her to which, when labor beings she retires with a Dai (midwifery) and a servant. This den to which the highest as well as the lowest is condemned, is known as the *Asauch-ghar* [12].

The table below indicates the number of women treated by the obstetric physicians in the Calcutta Medical Institution during 1875 to 1880 [13].

Table 1: Women treated by the obstetric physicians in the Calcutta Medical Institution during 1875 to 1880

| Year | Number of Women patients treated by obstetric physicians |
|------|--|
| 1875 | 1004 |
| 1876 | 1153 |
| 1877 | 1109 |
| 1878 | 1238 |
| 1879 | 1204 |
| 1880 | 1277 |

Most of the Muslim women are not enjoying their childhood in this time. Their early childhoods were mostly spent inside the *andarmahal*, playing with dolls or romping round the garden. As a girl, they were also taught to help in household chores, in cooking, sewing, knitting and embroidering. From an early age, they were brought up with the ultimate goal of a mind that is, the role of a wife or mother. Childhood did not last long for a girl. It would end almost the age of six or seven when she would be put in *purdah* and shortly afterwards she would considered ready for marriage [4]. Syeda Monowara Khatun recollected that when she was six or seven she had already finished three Urdu text which included 'Behesti Zewar' and 'Maftuhul Jinnat'. Her mother wanted that she should complete the instructional and scriptural text by the age of seven so that by the age of eight she could be married off [14].

A vast body of Anglo-Indian discursive writing which was produced in the second half of the nineteenth century also focused critically on the condition of Indian women in the *Zenana*, the women's quarters in upper class Hindu and Muslim households. *Zenana* was considered to be a place of dirt, darkness and disease [15] and they had no permission at all to consult a male physician for their medication.

The practice of 'Purdah' and 'polygamy' made the lives of 19th century Bengali Muslim Women deplorable. The literal meaning of *purdah* is 'curtain' or 'veil'. It represents a system in which Muslim Women are isolated from outsiders and are to observe high standards of female modesty. Observations of *purdah* restrict the mobility of women and contact

with men. *Purdah* was the sign of chastity of a woman. It is also a symbol of family aristocracy. The aristocratic classes of women observe *purdah* not only from men but also from unrelated women. Islam sanctions *purdah* for modesty, but it has breed misinterpreted according to existing social circumstances.

Many educated persons in this time criticism this customs. Shaista Ikramullah noted that, Nawab Syed Mahmud perforce had to accept certain things for himself and his sons, but he was determined not to accept them for his women folk. They were kept in the strictest *purdah* and even visit from women were restricted [16].

Polygamy was another practice which made the Bengali Muslim Women's lives in 19th century miserable. This practice is enjoined by the Qur'an and incorporated in the traditional Muslim Law [2]. A Muslim male is allowed to marry up to four wives at a time provided he has the means to maintain the wives properly according to their status and give equal love and affection to all wives and treats them with complete equality [17].

Right up to twentieth century polygamy was accepted as a norm and it was customary for an women to have a co-wife or *sauteen*. Hunter's statistical account of Tipperah district published in 1876, referred to the practice, polygamy is of course permitted among the Muhammadans. If the first wife is quarrelsome or ugly, or if there is a great deal of household work, a second wife is require [18].

Monowara in her short memoir also referred to polygamous marriages in the family's past, in the

latter half of the 19th century that her brother-in-law had four or five mother. But brother-in-law's father was a debauchee, whiling his days in wine and women. If ever he chanced upon a pretty girl who took his fancy he married her [15].

Another custom prevalent among the Muslim of Bengal in the 19th century was the custom of giving girls early marriage. Through Islamic laws enjoin consent of both the bride and bridegroom before the marriage is contracted in actual practice child marriage made this injunction non-effective. As early as Adam's education

report of 1835 and 1838, the wide prevalence of child marriage had been mentioned in official discourse as a deterrent to female education. Hunter in his Statistical Accounts of Bengal, presented a report on marriage norms in 1873 that both among Muhammadans and Hindus, boys are generally married between the ages of 15 and 20 while girls were usually married at 10 and had no choice. The parents arranged the match if possible in their own village [19].

The table below indicates the women who were married under the age of 15 [4].

Table 2. Reputed women married under the age of 15

| Name of the Muslim Women and year (Birth-Death) | Education Level and Carrier | Age at Marriage | Husband's Name & Profession |
|---|---|-----------------|---|
| Karimunnessa Khanam 1855-1926 | Home education Housewife | 14 | Ghaznavi, Landlord. |
| Malekunnessa 1885-1975 | Oral education, Housewife | 12 | S.Khan, Govt. Service. |
| Mamlukul Fatema Khanam 1894-1957 | Home education. Educationist, Writer. | 10 | Ataur Rahaman, Doctor |
| Aktar Mahal Syeda Khatun 1901-1929 | Home Education, Writer | 12 | Mahbulul huq, Landlord |
| Asema Khatun 1903-1986 | Home education Housewife | 14 | Urul Huda Choudhury, Govt. Service, Teacher |
| Mahmuda Khatun Siddika 1906-1977 | Secondary School, Writer | 12 | No information |
| Tohfatunnessa Azim 1913-1983 | Home education, House Wife, Editor, Social worker | 10 | Anearul Azim, Barrister. |
| Aaqiqunnessa Ahmad 1916-1983 | Home education, Writer | 10 | Abul Mansur Ahmad, Politicians, Writer |
| Hajera Khatun 1919- | Home education Housewife | 11 | Abdus Shukoor, Govt. Service. |
| Daulatunnessa Khatun 1922- | Primary School, Writer, Social worker | 08 | Hafizur Rahaman, Doctor |

Marriages would be arranged by guardians. Seldom if ever in sharif (gentle) society did girls and boys get a chance to meet each other prior to marriage. Individual preferences played a minor part and guardians generally went by a set of 'standerd' conditions. The ideal criteria for selecting spouses were laid down in manuals and contemporary periodicals [4]. One of the 'Hadit' that inspired the discourse on marriage set down in later manuals, dealt with the motivation behind selecting a woman as partner: "The Prophet said that the women can be married for her religion, for her fortune or for her beauty. Be motivated in your choice by her religion" [20].

In Islam marriage is a contract between two consenting parties. It is prescribed by God for all Muslim adult capable of normal functioning. But theoretically, a marriage may be terminated if any partner fails in his or her duties and desires to end the relationship. The ceremony itself is simple. It requires the consent of the couple to be married in the presence of two witnesses and a representative (called *wakil*) appointed by girl. The term specify the couple's identity and the amount of 'mohr' (dower money) to be given by groom to the bride as security. All this

and other vital stipulation in keeping with the '*Shariat*' may be put down on a paper called the '*kabin-nama*.' The groom or bride has the right to withhold consent without which, in theory, the marriage cannot take place [4].

Hunter referred to the '*kabin-nama*' in his Statistical Account of 1876 that it is also customary to register a certain document, by which a dower of about Rs. 100 is settled upon the bride, and among the more respectable classes such a paper carries with it certain legal right, duty set down in the Muhammadan law book [19].

Among middle class families *mohr* was customary to fix upon four to five hundred rupees while the rich often raised it to a lac [4]. The *mohr* was an important obligation for the husband but he could be released from it if the wife so desired and ideal wife was supposed to do so. Although dower became a mark of social status, it was originally designed to provide security to the wife [4].

In this period Muslim society had the system of 'Badhi' (female servants) Mir Mosharaf Hossen

referred his book 'Amar Jibam' that his family had 30-32 badhi who came from Rangpur. Kaji Imadul Haq noted his novel 'Abdulla' that sometime this badhi used in co-wife and her son working as a slave. Robert Blackhum wrote the fact that is until comparatively recent year. These so-called dancing girls were the only women in India who could read, dance, and sing [21].

Other class of neglected women present in Bengal were called 'Dai'(midwifery). This 'Dai' was nursing elite class Muslim women who did not go to male doctor. 1300 Dai was present in this time in total East Bengal. J.E. Websrar wrote on his book that, the 'dai' has inherited a despised calling and is always wretchedly poor. She has all the valor of ignorance and out of earns a living according to her light; moreover, she is badly paid. She may be given a fee for anything from two annas for a girl and four annas for a boy in a poor neighborhood, up to fifteen rupees, about twenty three shilling in the house of rich [22].

Conclusion

A glance at the period of four decades (1900-1939) reveals that significant changes occurred in the institution of the family, its structures and ideology. The entire framework of the Muslim family was transformed under the impact of new socio-economic changes and the rise of a new domestic ideology that accompanied them.

Governmental legislation aided the process of structural change in the family—especially with regard to child marriage, age of consummation, and divorce. Polygamy remained outside state jurisdiction, but societal attitude had taken a turn against polygamy and concubinage. Consequently, the practice began to die out in urban centers. The Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act of 1939 was the coping stone to the new edifice. All these changes concerned a new personality, the *bhadramahila*, (gentle woman) in Muslim society [4].

Acknowledgement

The author is thankful to Mr. Nirmalya Kumar Sinha, Dept of Nutrition, Raja N.L. Khan Womens College, West Bengal, India and Dr. Prasenjit Das, Superintendent of Kewakole Rural Hospital, West Bengal, India for constant encouragement throughout the study.

References

1. Karim A. Social History of the Muslims in Bengal. Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitya Prakash. 1959. pp 37.
2. Husain S. The Role of Muslim Women In The 19th and 20th Century, SHS-85/CONF/15. pp 1
3. Chakraborty R. Beginning of Muslim Women's Education in Colonial Bengal, Historical Research: Dec 2011; 1: 76.
4. Nishat AS. The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal: 1876-1939. New York: Brill Publication: 1996.
5. Mukherjee SN, Class Caste and politics in Calcutta 1815-1838, in Calcutta: Myths and History. Calcutta: Subarnareka. 1977. pp 8-10.
6. Travers R. Ideology and Empire in Eighteen Century India: the British in India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2007.
7. For Shabaz beg's carrer, from Kabul to Patna, George Bogle's report on the case, written in his capacity of Commissioner of Law Suits (responsible for coordianating the Company's dealing in the Supreme Court), BLC, 13April 1779; OIOC, IOR /166/82: 2-3.
8. Order by parliament in the Bengal Judicature Act of 1781.
9. Khan I. Batayan. Dakha: Bangla academi. 1967. pp 209-210.
10. Rahman N, Anowara, First pub. Calcutta; 1914: rept. Dakha: Ananda Prakashan. 1988; 215-8.
11. Therese Blanchet. Meaning and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1984.
12. Wise J. Note on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal. London: Harrison and Sons. 1883; 50-51
13. Proceeding the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Medical and Municipal Department, June 1882.
14. Khatun Syeda Monowara, Smritir Pata, Eaksthan; 1296 BS: page-29
15. Nair J. Uncovering the Zenana: Visions of Indian Womanhood in Englishwomen's Writings, 1813-1940. J Women History. 1990; 2(11): 88-134.
16. Ikramullah S. From purdah to Parliament, London: Cresset publishers. 1963; pp8.
17. Mustafa KS. Islam a arir Adhikar (Ref: Sura isar, Al Koran). Kolkata: Bani Prakasani. 1988; pp94.
18. Hunter. Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. VI

- (Tipperah), London:1877, rept. Delhi: Govt of India.1973; Page-383.
19. Hunter W.W, Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol.vi(Noakhali), London;1877, rept. Delhi, Govt. of India. 1973; Page-179.
20. Tarmidi A. Sunan-al-Tarmidi, (Medina,n.d), Chapter 4, hadit 1095; page-54.
21. Blackhum Robert, Incompatible India: Tradition, Superstition, Truth, London, Oxford University Press, n.d. p-198.
22. Webstair JB. East Bengal Distric Gazetteer. 1911. pp 196.
-

Red Flower Publication Pvt. Ltd.

Presents its Book Publications for sale

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| 1. Breast Cancer: Biology, Prevention and Treatment | Rs.395/\$100 |
| 2. Child Intelligence | Rs.150/\$50 |
| 3. Pediatric Companion | Rs.250/\$50 |

Order from

Red Flower Publication Pvt. Ltd.

48/41-42, DSIDC, Pocket-II, Mayur Vihar, Phase-I

Delhi - 110 091 (India)

Tel: 91-11-22754205, 45796900, Fax: 91-11-22754205

E-mail: redflowerpppl@gmail.org, redflowerpppl@vsnl.net

Website: www.rfppl.co.in