

Lack of Education Among Muslim Women in India: Is Religion to be Blamed?

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Received August 25, 2017

Accepted Sept. 10, 2017

ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the author's findings based on a first-hand study of a typically Islamic society – in this case Iran – on the role of Islam vis a vis education among Muslim women. The level of literacy among Indian women is much lower than among Indian men but this situation is particularly glaring among the Indian Muslims. This has often led to the belief that the roots of this situation lie in Islam which, supposedly, discourages education and liberty for women. To obtain insights into the problem the authors took a study visit to Iran which is a theocratic republic, and is controlled by clerics and Islamic law, the Sharia. This paper summarizes the authors' findings.

Key words: Islam, Muslim women, The Quran, Sharia, Hijaab, education

1. Introduction

Socio-economic surveys done from time to time by different agencies have always revealed that:

- a) The economic condition of Indian Muslims is by-and-large poorer than of most other communities.
- b) The same is true of the level of formal education.
- c) Within the Muslim community, the level of education among women is still much lower than that of the Muslim men.

A deeply prevalent belief is that this situation is basically due to the tenets of Islam which discourage any education other than Islamic theology. Moreover, it is also widely believed that Islam provides for a subordinate status for women and the insistence on wearing *hijaab* and *burqa* (Figure 1) further restricts women, physically and emotionally, which all contribute to the illiteracy and ignorance among the Muslim women.



Figure 1: Muslim women draped in *burqa*; is Islam responsible for the backwardness of Muslim women in India (loupiote.com/photos/11315136136.shtml)

To obtain insights into the problem the author took a study visit to Iran which is a theocratic republic, and is controlled by clerics and Islamic law, the *Sharia*.

2. The Situation in Iran

One is confronted by two realities as soon as one steps out of an aircraft and in to the Islamic Republic of Iran:

- a) The presence of a much larger proportion of women in the work-force everywhere;
- b) All women wearing a heard-scarf (*hijaab*).

In fact to the great irritation of one of the authors (TA) an air-hostess had stopped her from exiting the aircraft and had tied a *hijaab* on my head saying, “you can’t go into Iran bare-headed”.

“But I am not an Iranian, I am just a visitor” her protested.

“Yes but even the women visitors from USA and Europe have to wear *Hijaab* in Iran”, she said.

We felt appalled and thought “what a hopelessly backward country”! This first impression was destined to be proven wrong again and again.

Stepping into Iran, even as we saw no woman without a *hijaab*, we also saw a lot more woman among the airport staff than one sees in India. Once out of the airport and speeding in taxi to our hotel we were astonished to see that as many vehicles around us were being driven by women than by men (Figure 2). Ladies even operated taxis (Figure 3).

In subsequent days, when visiting different cities and towns across Iran, and interacting with different cross-sections of the societies there, we could see that there is unmistakable restraint on women in the sense that they can’t be seen in public without *Hijaab* (head scarf) and can’t wear dresses which leave open shoulders and legs, or are ‘revealing’ in any other sense. But, we found, it wasn’t suppression of women because the Iranian society also puts a lot of similar restrictions on men; baring of even arms and toes by them in public is deemed as indecent. When we asked, the Iranians justified it by saying that Islam advocates dignified and understated bearing as it generates vibes of peace and tranquility lying at the core of Islamic theology.



Figure 2: It is much more common to see ladies driving cars in Iran than in India

Notwithstanding this highly debatable justification, the restrictions don’t extend to pursuit of knowledge nor to the dissemination of knowledge by women. The campuses are teeming with girl students. Even at the Sharif University of Technology, which has the same iconic status as of our IITs and IISc, girl students equal boys in number (Figure 4). Women are also a lot more strongly represented in faculty than in India or even in UK (where TA had the opportunity to study). Indeed women are seen doing as wide-ranging jobs as men (Figure 5).



Figure 3: A women taxi operator in Iran

Discourses with Islamic scholars in Iran, and subsequently in India, revealed that, interestingly, the roots of emphasis on women's education lie in the Islamic theology which proclaims that 'acquiring knowledge is a path to God' and that there is equality between men and women!

The Islamic prophet, Mohammad, always said, *the ink of a scholar's pen is more sacred than the blood of a martyr and handsome is the person in the eyes of god who is reading a book.* He even said *an hour's study to acquire knowledge is better than an year's prayer!*

The emphasis on equal rights between man and women is also a cornerstone of Islamic theology. Islamic societies practiced it since several centuries before Europe and America did. From medieval times — when a women, Razia had become Sultan of India — to modern era when the presidents/PMs of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey etc have been women, Islam has accepted women exercising the highest authority over men.

As for the injunction that one should not derive knowledge from any book other than the *Koran*, it is a myth. Mohammed always said *listen to the words of the scientist and instill into others the lessons of science.*

It was this emphasis on pursuit of knowledge, particularly science, which was the reason why teachings in Oxford and Cambridge till the advent of industrial revolution were based on Islamic textbooks (Abbasi and Abbasi, 2010, 2017).



Figure 4: Sharif University of Technology, considered to be the top university in West Asia (above) has a large proportion of women students as other Iranian universities (payvand.com/news/11/oct/1069.html; timesofisrael.com/eu-court-scraps-sanctions-on-iranian-university/)



Figure 5: The Iranian work-force has large presence of women, who are seen in all professions.

The four 'eyes' of Islam are said to be (Ali 1997):

Ilm(knowledge)

Ijma (consensus)

Istishlah(public interest)

Ijtihad (sustained reasoning)

It may be concluded that religion isn't the real handicap in the path to education of Indian Muslims, especially women. It is in fact, potentially, a catalyst. Nor are the commonly believed signs of women's emancipation – western style of dressing and ostentatious conduct – make the foundation for emancipation because, in that sense, Iranian women are a lot more self-assured, with greater sense of control over their choices in life, than is generally seen in other developing countries. Hence Islam cannot be the real cause of lack of literacy among Muslim women in India and the cause is essentially economic backwardness. A wrong, bigoted, and deliberate misinterpretation of Islam by vested interests within Muslims and outside, has also contributed. Further, some aspects of gender suppression, which happen to be common everywhere and aren't associated in real sense with any religion, exacerbate the jeopardy of economic backwardness in Muslim women.

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