

A Profile of Badia Women

Women in any society acquires a significant position because the continuation of humanity is maintained through them. Even at this age of cloning human civilisation depends upon woman only. But the status of women is adjudged differently in different societies. Status is determined through roles and positions. In Muslim society, ideally an egalitarian one, the women are supposed to enjoy an equal status with the men. Practically this has not been happened in every community who follows Islam. Ambiguity and incongruity in the status of women are manifestations of an ongoing adaptive truss in Muslim society (Roy Burman, 1978). A lot of inconsistency is observed in the Quoran, the model of Islamic rules, regarding the status of women (Roy, 1979). Respect and good treatment for mother and women as such are stressed in Islam. Mother is held with high esteem. "The prophet proclaimed that the paradise is at the feet of the mother" (Dejbar, 1961:27). In Surah 4:34 it is mentioned again that men are permitted to bit their wives ~~Abul Fatah 1961:32~~ which is an opposition of the ^{former} ~~later~~ statement.

Marriage and divorce are prerogatives of males only. In Islam a man is allowed to marry upto four women if he can assure justice to them all. But the polyandry is not thought of in any condition. Unilateral freedom is enjoyed by

man regarding divorce though Quoran did not say so. Of course being a patrilineal society Muslim males interpreted the Quoranic rules in their favour. Interpolative elements have been added to the Quoran by various religious heads. According to the principle of Quoran observance of purdah can^{be} avoided_x during war and epidemics but the interpreters of the holy book or the religious heads do not allow women's appearance in public without burkha. Meher money is the sole property of women but they rarely get it. Property inheritance rule is not unequivocal in Islam. "Woman is biologically different from man, but modern trends rightly emphasise the similarities rather than desimilitaries. Due to scientific and technological advance there is less physical and more mental labour which is favourable aspect to establish woman's equality. Educational qualifications facilitated this process" (Hate, 1969:263). Education plays an important role for changing the status. "Today the formally educated muslim women have a first hand knowledge of the religious texts. With the result that on one hand they have begun to challenge the validity of the interpolative elements in the religious and on the other hand they have become stunch followers of Islam, fully aware of the restrictions and liberties sanctioned to them in the koran. These women are different from those of the earlier generations in the sense that they have not oriented their lives on the so called traditional religious behaviours blindly, but they have made efforts to understand the religious scriptures" (Roy, 1979:5). "This phenomenon of the increased religious awareness as a consequence of education.....sometimes modernisation means strengthening old ways of life as and when literacy enables individuals to appreciate religious

doctrines in their purer form, unmixed by superstitions" (Anderson 1966: 74). Thus, education is an important factor leading towards modernisation, but it does not necessarily change the Islamic orientation towards life and social behaviour. Instead, the educated woman finds herself comparatively equal with man to search for personal salvation through pursuit of religion while following the Islamic course of living, she finds herself to be discriminated against in many domains and suppressed by the sanctioned traditional authority pattern.

Traditional authority is defined as "a system of imperative co-ordination will be called traditional is legitimacy is claimed for it and believed in on the basis of sanctity of the order and attendant powers of control as they have always existed.... The person to person exercising authority are designated according to traditionally transmitted rules. The object of obedience is the personal authority of the individual which he enjoys by virtue of his traditional status. Besides, in such a structure there is no machinery to enforce the authority it more or less depends on the willingness and respect of people for the person in authority." (Weber 1947:341). In the authority structure of the family the most important personnels are father, husband and son. Women are on the receiving end.

Analysis of various activities and achievement in different walks of life as well as rites and rituals starting from birth to death reveal the role performance of woman among the Badias.

Role-set of a woman is seen as mother, wife, daughter and friend. Following the rules of Quoran, Badias plays their mothers at the highest position

in society and they do not utter their mother's name unless the situation compels. The mothers are highly respected in Badia society.

It has been observed in Malda and Murshidabad bastis of Milangarh village that the girls within the age group of upto twelve years start doing household works. By this age they have to learn cooking, cleaning the cloths and courtyards and making their clothes ready to use. Their education had already been stopped. Their guardians start searching grooms for their marriage. The mean at marriage among the Badia girls is 14.82 years.

Due to this low age at marriage the literacy rate among them is not high. Only 35.5 percent of the females are literate. Majority of them (87.98%) are educated upto primary stage i.e. class IV. Of course, all of them are found to attend the Maktabas where the religious teachings are offered. Though the Badias do realise the necessity ^{of} ~~the~~ formal education and, therefore, founded a junior high Madrasah school in their locality, turn up of women in formal education is still very low.

Free mixing of children is allowed upto the age of 8 to 10 years. Then such type of behaviours is restricted by their elders.

In regard to purdah the Badias strictly adhere to it. In their households a fencing of bamboo or jute stick has been surrounding the house so that the females are not easliy be exposed to outsiders. Even, in some cases, entertainment of mehamaan (gufests) in way of offering food is done by the male

members of the family. Except on the religious festivals the Badia women do not go to the Mosque.

Showing respect to the father-in-law and elder brother-in-law is the prime duty or considered as the virtue of every married woman. As this is not followed strictly by some women of Murshidabad basti the jamat leader (Elder Council) of Malda basti has decided not to select bride from the former settlement).

After marriage every woman is expected to obey the orders of her husband. Chance of equal participation in case of decision making is not there. The authority of the household normally comes transferred from father to son. The female head of the family is occasionally found in the studied areas. It happens so because either the son is minor or absent.

Among the Muslims whenever a boy is born joyful event happens and it is considered as a matter of great celebration while the birth of a girl is considered as a matter of silence (Mandal, 1997). Average Badia people think that the girls are others property because they have to go to their husbands' houses. Initial investments for their rearing as well as expenses on marriage are considered as a loss to them.

Movement of the Badia woman is not free. They are always escorted by males except in childhood. Going to market or operas without a male companion is beyond imagination for a Badia young female or married woman. They are not

allowed to express their attitudes through performances of songs (Samad, 1989). Except the work of fetching water from the near by tubewells they normally do not go outside the boundary wall of the household. This conservative attitude of the Badias are relaxed for the poor people and also in among the highly educated families.

Women of poor families are found to work in the field as agricultural labourers though percentage of such worker is negligible. Normally in the absence of husband or any adult males in the family such activities are not looked down upon by the Badia community. Participation of adults as well as children, in gainful employment is shown below:

Table No. VIII.1.

Distribution of adult and child workers by sex

Category	Female		Male		Total	
	Child	33	16.75	78	11.21	111
Adult	164	83.25	618	88.79	782	87.57
Total	197	100.00	696	100.00	893	100.00

Pros and cons in regard to agricultural labour of women in the studied areas has been represented by the following case study:

Fela Bibi is living in Murshidabad basti with her five children. Her husband is missing for ten years. She has no agricultural land in her possession. The family of six members are to run by her. Out of three sons one is polio affected. With a government relief last year she has managed to erect a kutchra

house. Most of the days a year she works as agriculture labourer. Except ploughing she does all ~~the~~^{type} of work related to agriculture. But she gets at least Rs.5/- less than the wage of a male. She earns Rs.20 to Rs.25 per day. This earning is not sufficient to meet the expenses of her family. So her eldest daughter has also been engaged in plucking tea leaves in the nearby tea gardens. Rigidity of social/religious control is relaxed in such cases.

Percentage of working women only 22.94 per cent. This figure excludes the household work because the prime ~~of~~^{duty} of a girl or woman is to look after all the domestic chores in the Badia society. She has to do these even after a few days of child birth. In the Uttar Dhamargach and Dakshin Dhamargach settlements it has been observed that many women perform the work of bidi binding along with other domestic works. In some houses the girl children look after their family and all the adult women do bidi binding. Here, observance of purdah is reduced. The women also perform the business deal with the middle man involved in bidi business. Husband-wife relationship in these families is of mutual co-operation.

Normally the wife do not utter the name of her husband. On the contrary the husbands do not hesitate to bit their wives if everything in the family is not kept in order. Sexual desire of the wife is also controlled by the husband. Clitoridectomy is not there but the wives are supposed to tolerate sexual torture by their husbands. Woman is just like a commodity to her husband.

Divorce can be obtained by a woman if she wants but no maintenance is granted to her. So for safety and security in most cases she does not claim divorce. Practically the institution of divorce is male biased. Exception to the normative aspect of divorce is also noticed in Malda basti of Milangarh village. Ainur Rehman, son of the maulabi of the village, has been married with his maternal cousin. She was a divorcee and her father i.e. the maternal uncle of Ainur, promised to give him a large share of his huge property. After marriage Ainur's father-in-law as well as maternal uncle did not keep his word. His wife gave birth of two still born babies. Therefore, Ainur decided to divorce his wife and marry again. His father also gave consent on Ainur's proposal but one elder brother of Ainur stood on the way. He is doing service in Police Department, Government of West Bengal. Then Ainur had to change his decision and ultimately the poor lady has been saved from the uncertainty of her life. Now they have a son of one year.

Differential treatment for men and women is noticed in the normative behaviour of the Badias. Pronouncement of azan and ekamat are done differently for a male child and a female child. For selection of mate parents of the groom is to initiate the move. According to law the women of Muslim community are allowed to inherit 1/8th of the property of male counterparts but the women in Badia community specially among lower income groups, actually do not inherit any share except some movable things.

Differential attitude are also held regarding the girl child by the parents. As the male child is expected to support them in future the parents favour him. They like to feed him better than a female child. They prefer to send their son to the schools and colleges for higher education. Whereas religious education in Maktabas is considered sufficient for their girls. They do not allow the girls to go to cinema though boys are allowed to take part in various cultural activities. Educational scenario of the Badia women is shown below in comparison with their male counterparts:

Table No. VIII.2.

Literacy Position of the Badias

Standard	Female		Male		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Literate without Standard	47	12.84	58	10.41	105	11.13
Upto Class IV	275	75.14	388	69.66	663	70.31
V to X	43	11.75	122	21.90	165	17.50
M. P./ H. S.	1	0.27	4	0.72	5	0.53
B. A.	0	---	5	0.90	5	0.53
Total Literate	366	100.00	557	100.00	943	100.00

Games and Sports are also the fields dominated by males. At the same age, when a boy is playing outside home a girl is engaged with her mother and work in stitching a cloth. It is considered a sporting event for her.

Traditionally participation of woman in politics is not allowed by their society. They are to vote to the candidates in the general elections whom their male counterparts select. Neither are they allowed to campaign publicly for any candidate nor they can contest in election. But the situation is being changed. Due to latest amendment in the People's Representation Act of India the Badia women were forced to contest in the Panchayat Election.

But, the situation is being changed gradually. For economic reasons and also for allowing the forces of modernisation the conditions of women are gradually improving. The girls are attending schools and women are engaged in the gainful employment outside their homes. One third reservation of seats in public bodies like panchayat has forced the Badia people to accept womens' participation in politics.

Status of women is so low that a widow has to pass through three months (periodic cycle) iddat period after the death of her husband. By this time she can not marry but in case of husband at the death of his wife he can marry after forty days of mourning.

An acute problem for a widow is also found in Mujlimiras situation (son's death during his father's life time) the widow or her children are deprived of inheriting property. Family of procreation ignores her as because she is a widow.

Observation

Muslim women are supposed to enjoy an equal status as per the basic tenets of Islam. In empirical situation condition of women is somewhat different. In Badia society it has been observed that position of women is not considered at par with the men. Though Meher is considered as a sole property of the woman, in most cases it is kept unpaid at the time of marriage. Mutual adjustment with brothers, in regard to inheritance of property, also deprive the women of their actual share.

Both economically and educationally they are lagging behind the males. More than 80 percent of Badia women are confined to household work. They are solely dependent upon their male counterparts. Bidi rolling is the only source from which a good number of women earn at least something. About 15 percent of women are engaged in such type of work in the studied settlements. Literacy rate of the Badia women is low (35.5%). Among the literate women majority (87.98%) have read upto class IV. However, women extend immense service for their families. They are overloaded with household duties. As a wife, Badia woman is unable to enjoy a high status but as a mother she is esteemed high. Observance of purdah is considered by them as a kind of social honour and respectability. The condition of women in Badia society is also not static. They are experiencing some changes. Women are being involved in politics too.