

Beyond the Veil: Understanding the Lives of Muslim Women in South Asia

24 July 2017

**Organised by Department of History, Diamond Harbour Women's University, in collaboration
with Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata**

Concept Note

The Muslim woman had for long remained hidden from history. While she did not exist in South Asia prior to the Arab invasions of Sind in the 8th century, the chroniclers of the Sultanate and the Mughal regime (Ziya uddin Barani, Amir Khusrau, Ibn Batuta, Abul Fazl, Faizi, et al) did not care to write about her. She was invisibilized and muted. She was equally absent in the histories of medieval India written by British imperialist historians of the nineteenth century such as James Mill, Elliot and Dowson, Vincent Smith, WH Moreland, et al and those written by early Indian nationalist historians such as Jadunath Sarkar, R C Majumdar, et al. Only recently have historians started exploring the status of Muslim women in medieval India (Sudha Sharma, Ruby Lal, et al). Recent research reveals that her existence was no better than that of a caged bird. Perpetually confined within the innards of the zenana, she was denied education and a modicum of health care. While lineage and marriage catapulted one or two women to political leadership and positions of influence, eg, Sultana Razia, Nur Jahan, et al, the vast majority of them remained detached from happenings in the outer world.

Traditional historical scholarship on colonial India maintained an undue reticence on women in general and Muslim women in particular. Women, if they did exist, figured merely as passive beneficiaries of social reform initiated by male reformers. The androcentric bias of history was starkly manifest. There was no effort to uncover women's agency and record their voices. The Bengal Renaissance was depicted as an elite Hindu affair and neither Muslim men nor their women counterparts figured in it. The 'women's question' was not the question that concerned all women, only upper caste elite Hindu women were within its purview. Muslim women, doubly marginalized, i.e. marginalized by patriarchy and community, were similarly conspicuous by their absence in the historiography on the nationalist movement. A concatenation of androcentric and communal prejudices thus accounted for the exclusion of Muslim women from the annals of South Asian history.

The 1970s were a turning point in historical scholarship. The spurt of radical feminism in the 1960s goaded the United Nations Organization to address the issue of gender inequality. India was directed to probe the status of women in society, and this led to the constitution of a Committee for the Status of Women in India in 1971 which after several years of fact-finding presented the Towards Equality report on 1 January 1975, the day that marked the beginning of the UN Decade for Women. The

report was a watershed in many ways. It shook the elite intelligentsia out of their complacency with its shocking revelation that the condition of Indian women had changed little since Independence. On one hand, it triggered an autonomous women's movement in India, on the other, it led to the introduction of Women's Studies programmes in various research institutes and universities. The development of Women's Studies and the escalating momentum of the women's movement also propelled the traditional mainstream disciplines to rethink their parameters. The feminist intervention in the discipline of history, for instance, led to the development of women's/ gender history. The aim of women's/ gender history is not merely to add women - the hitherto excluded, marginalized, silenced and invisibilized section of humankind - into the fold of history and unravel their hitherto neglected roles in the public domain but to also move away from political and economic happenings in the public sphere into the apparently uneventful life everyday lives of women within the inner domain of the household - the domain that patriarchy has relegated women to. Women's/gender history questions binaries and stereotypes, foregrounds women's agency, her creativity and makes her voice heard.

The feminist intervention in history also brought into sharper focus the intersections of patriarchy with caste, class, race and community, and the realization that the lives of all women are not the same. Thus the lives of upper-caste Hindu women, feminist historians realized, are not same as those of dalit women, the lives of Muslim women are different from those of Hindu women, indicative of the existence of not one but multiple patriarchies. South Asian historians, predominantly Muslim women historians located in India and Bangladesh (Sonia Nishat Amin, Syed Tanveer Nasreen, Asha Islam Nayeem, Maleka Begum, Rezina Begum, Shadab Bano, et al) but not exclusively so (Uttara Chakrabarty, Gail Minault, Mahua Sarkar, Sudha Sharma), began exploring the conditions of Muslim women in the medieval, colonial and contemporary times. Their researches reveal that the lives of Muslim women started changing gradually since the middle of the nineteenth century (Sonia Nishat Amin). Schools were established for and also by Muslim women side by side with the proliferation of zenana education (Sonia Nishat Amin, Uttara Chakraborty, Asha Islam Nayeem). They began to pen polemic prose and creative literature, and besides, they participated significantly in the debates of the time, evident in the vast corpus of literature they authored in late nineteenth and early twentieth century (undivided) Bengal. Education and literary creativity were two facets of the awakening of Muslim women in the second half of the nineteenth century, an intellectual, social and cultural awakening that triggered the emergence of the Muslim 'bhadramahila', the counterpart of the Hindu/Brahmo gentlewoman. Muslim women became politically active in the early decades of the twentieth century, manifested in their growing involvement in the nationalist struggle for independence (Rezina Begum).

The seminar threw the spotlight on the status of women in pre-colonial South Asia, and also examined their changing role and position in the colonial period, seeing Muslim not just as victims of oppressive social mores but as actors, women who challenged hostile mindsets and succeeded in assuming control over their lives.

The Partition was a major watershed in the history of the Indian subcontinent. This phenomenon has been studied by numerous scholars from different perspectives, viewed through different analytical lenses. The one dimension that has, however, so far failed to elicit sufficient attention is the dimension of women's sufferings that accompanied the event. Hindu and Muslim women suffered equally the travails and traumas of politically engineered borders, but their agonies were seldom registered in official records. The seminar addressed this historiographical silence and opened discussion on the impact of Partition on Muslim women. The woes of Muslim women in East Pakistan did not end in 1947. The Bangladesh War of 1971 brought in its trail another bout of population displacement that affected Muslim women no less than their Hindu counterparts. Women faced violence of all kinds, a fact hitherto unrecorded in history. In independent Bangladesh, women have shot to political leadership again and again but this has not solved the problems of Muslim women in this country. Power is fraught with compromises that often relegate women's issues to the backseat. Moreover, while women lead the state, vast numbers of Muslim women daily suffer domestic violence. The sufferings of Muslim women in conflict ridden areas like Kashmir also need to be focused on.

The Uniform Civil Code vs Muslim Personal Law debate remains one of the most controversial issues in contemporary India. The scope for a renewed engagement in the debate is never exhausted. The issue of triple talaq has generated a great deal of heat in recent times. While the issue has triggered an unwelcome level of politicization, it has also brought to the fore the activism of Muslim women's civil society groups. In contemporary India, Muslim women continue to lag behind their Hindu counterparts in terms of education, health care and employment. A Survey of the Status of Women in a Minority Community conducted by the CSWI (1975) revealed that a high proportion of Muslim respondents had no formal education and did not know any written language. Their awareness with regard to their rights as specified in the Shariyat or those guaranteed by the Constitution was abysmally low. The Sachar Committee Report of 2006 records little progress of Muslim women in terms of education and other development indices in the interim decades. It reveals that the condition of Indian Muslim women is worse than that of dalit women. The rise of fundamentalisms, both Hindu and Muslim, has aggravated the plight of Muslim women. The Muslim woman's veil has become a symbol of Islamic identity, and this is accompanied by greater restrictions on her mobility and freedom of interaction. Intercommunity

marriages remain fraught with tension, inciting communal strife and inviting ostracism and killings for the sake of honour. An academic engagement with these issues is the need of the hour.

The seminar explored the baseline realities of Muslim women's lives, the oppression they faced and continue to face, and also highlighted their agency and activism, their achievements and contributions to various walks of life through the various periods of history in South Asia. The seminar discussed and deliberated on Muslim women in South Asia from a gender-sensitive historical perspective and created opportunities for dialogue among academicians, activists and policy makers.

Programme Schedule

International Seminar: August 24, 2017

BEYOND THE VEIL: MUSLIM WOMEN IN SOUTH ASIA

**Organised by the Women's Studies Centre, Lady Brabourne College & the Department of History,
Diamond Harbour Women's University**

Venue: Auditorium, Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata

PROGRAMME

10.30 a.m. – Inauguration

11 a.m. – 1 p.m. – Session 1

Chair: Dr. Basabi Chakraborty, Head, Dept of Sociology, Rabindra Bharati University

Speakers: 1. **Prof. Maleka Begum**, Chairperson, Sociology and Gender Studies Department, Central Women's University, Dhaka: *Parida Bhenge Dakshin Asio Muslim Narir Agrojatra: Bangladesh er Narir Shiksha theke Karmakshetre Uttaran*

2. **Dr. Indrani Choudhuri Dutt**, Associate Prof., Dept of English & IQAC Coordinator, Lady Brabourne College: *Space for a Flight Towards Empowerment*

3. **Dr. Anindita Ghoshal**, Assistant Prof., Dept. of History, Diamond Harbour Women's University: *The Invisible Refugees: Muslim Refugee Women in East Pakistan, 1947-71*

1 p.m. – 1.30 p.m. – Lunch Break

1.30 – 3.30 p.m. – Session 2

Chair: Dr. Aparna Bandyopadhyay, Associate Prof. & Head, Dept. of History, Diamond Harbour Women's University

Speakers: 4. **Selina Hossain**, Executive Director, Fareea Lara Foundation & academician, author & editor, Bangladesh: *Mathar Aboron: Bangladesh er Sashkritik Prekshit.*

5. **Dr. Safoora Razeq**, Assistant Professor, Department of History, Aliah University, *Unveiling the Mind: Muslim Women & the Reformist Discourse in the 19th Century South Asia*

6. **Dr. Shaheen Sultana**, Associate Professor & Head, Dept. of Urdu, Lady Brabourne College, *Women & Islam*

3.30 p.m. - 4.15 p.m. - Session 3 - Parallel Sessions

Chair: Sm. Uttara Chakraborty, Former Faculty, Dept of History, Bethune College

&

Prof. Sanjukta Das, Professor and Head, Dept. of English, Lady Brabourne College

- Paper presentations

4.15 p.m.: Valedictory

Valedictory Address: Dr. Maitreyee Bardhan Roy, Professor Emeritus, Guest Coordinator & Guest Faculty, Women's Studies Dept, Diamond Harbour Women's University.

4.30 p.m.: Certificate Distribution

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