



**Modernization and Social Change Amongst the
Muslim Women in Assam: A Comparative Study of
Jorhat and Golaghat Districts**

Ph.D. Thesis

by

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New Delhi

August, 2019

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The process of modernization of India was kickstarted by the penetration of British colonialism in the in the 19th century. However, the modernization of India was not the project of colonialism but was indeed a by-product of their attempts to systematically rule the country and plunder its wealth for sustaining the industrial revolution in Britain. The development of modern means of communication was to provide a link to penetrate into the country deeply, the development of education was to prepare a batch of indigenous collaborators, the development of commerce was incidental to colonies, the establishment of impersonal bureaucratic system was to effectively deal with any opposition to the empire, and the political unity was a natural corollary to the project of systematic loot and plunder of India.

The modernization, therefore, that began as a colonial project, was taken ahead in the independent India by the Constitution of India itself which ensures and guarantees equal treatment of all the citizens irrespective of gender, caste, religion etc. The Preamble of the Constitution assures socio-economic and political equality, opportunity and dignity to each individual irrespective of gender. India has been making significant efforts for the advancement and development of women. But in spite of providing enormous safeguards for women in the constitution, the condition of women in general and Muslim women in particular has remained bad in actuality. Gender inequality along with class and caste continues to be a prominent feature of Indian society. Historical suppression of women has not ended completely in spite of the modernization in most walks of life.

The current study on Modernization and Social Change amongst Muslim Women in Assam presents a clear picture of disadvantage and subordinate status of Muslim women in Assam. India is rapidly moving towards modernization and as a result changes have taken place in many spheres. Like that Assam is also in the process of evolution. On the one hand changes can be seen in the areas of politics, economy, culture and society in Assam but on the other hand Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular are lagging behind in all major fields such as education, work force, awareness etc. Throughout history women have always been alienated and neglected by the patriarchal society. Patriarchy is embedded in our societies in such a way that the arrival of modernization in most of the spheres of life has not been able to undo the oppression of women and their backwardness in comparison to men.

In this study we have found that the condition of Muslim women is poor, and they are living a sub-standard life. This reflects from their status in education, their entitlements, the employment conditions, health and so on. In the field of education, they are hardly able to complete primary or middle level schooling and if somehow they complete intermediate level, there are lesser chances for them to continue higher education. Lack of education and poverty reinforces patriarchy and forces the women to remain confined within the house and prevents them from working outside. As a result, they are economically bound to depend on their husbands and this in turn limits their space to take part in decision making process. All the freedoms that characterise a free person are not available to women in a patriarchal society. Illiteracy, lack of education, poverty, economic dependence all together strengthen the patriarchal structure.

This study has found that, to some extent, there is a similarity between the condition of Muslim women in case of Assam and the women in general in India. The status of Muslim women as reported by Sachar Committee in 2005 is still more or less same and not much improvement has taken place in the lives of Muslims women in India in general and Assam in particular. In 2006, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) conducted a national survey to explore the status of Muslims in India and found poverty and unemployment to be the most common issues amongst Muslim.¹⁸¹ The condition of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular has not been bettered after the conduct of such national level surveys in 2005 and 2006. Although this study presents changes in some areas such as attitude of women towards education, marriage age, willingness to work, desire to improve living standard etc. yet poverty is a major obstacle in securing decent lives for them, let alone enrolling their children in private schools. From the study it has been revealed that majority of women who are engaged in self-employed activities with low income are bound to work to survive. They have to work at a particular place because of compulsion not by choice. Poverty forces them to earn money as their husbands are unable to carry on family necessities alone. Poverty in Indian society is gender biased; it affects men and women differently.

Poverty leads to the reduction of food consumption and it in turn makes women and female children to eat fewer amounts. When household income falls down, it is female children whose education is sacrificed so that male child can pursue education. Due to the privatization of economy, more often it is a woman

¹⁸¹ Hilal Ahmed, "Exploring Muslims Reservation," *Economic and Political Weekly*, last modified January 13, 2014, https://www.epw.in/blog/hilal-ahmed/exploring-muslim-representation.html?0=ip_login_no_cache%3Db178a403b774917b83468607bb1c3a31.

who is thrown out from wage labour rather than a male. Further, the impact of poverty on women has deeper as well as longer term consequences not only for women but also for a society as well. Female children undergo malnutrition, younger girls have to substitute household work in the absence of mothers who go to work outside, and low investment in their health and education. Poverty alleviation programmes have seldom been able to uplift the life of women especially Muslim women due to the reason of the half-hearted policy implementation as well as the bureaucratic corruption. Further the absence of Muslim women specific programmes to eliminate poverty makes the life of Muslim women more miserable and dependent upon the whims and caprices of their husbands.

The condition of poverty is further strengthened by illiteracy and lack of education due to which women are not properly aware about governmental plans and programmes. The study reveals that larger number of women do not access any print media like newspaper or magazine. Only few women belonging to middle class families access regional newspapers and magazines for their children. Print media plays a significant role in modernization yet subscription of print media has no deeper reach in the rural areas, and it becomes irrelevant in case of the illiterate women. In the condition of illiteracy and lack of education, audio-visual media such as television, radio etc. can be great tools for providing information. But this study reveals that even the use of television is not helpful due to several reasons like the shortage of electricity in the villages; and the use of television for the purpose of entertainment rather than information. Therefore, in this situation when there is no avenue of awareness, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of governmental organizations, as well as non-governmental

organizations and other such institution to aware women regarding any plans and programmes.

This study refutes the widely prevalent argument that *purdah* in Islam curtails the rights of Muslim women and prohibits them to pursue education and work outside home. The study has found that neither education nor work participation is affected by *purdah* rather these are affected by poverty and patriarchal mindset prevalent in the society. The study reveals that out of 400 women respondents, not a single woman observes *purdah*. Their families and husbands also do not force any such kind of restrictions on them. Majority of women responded that they needed permission from their family elders and husbands to work outside. In regards of education of the girl child and marriage the father or brother's decision is ultimate. On the one hand lack of employment opportunities and poverty and on the other hand the requirement of husband's permissions for work and the burden of families makes women to opt for home-based job which enables them to carry their day to day responsibilities. Women generally are made to believe that marriage, child-bearing, taking care of families are the primary occupation for a woman and that household activities are basically made for women not for men.

It is not religion or *purdah* that is responsible for the backward condition of Muslim women in Assam but lack of education and employment opportunities, lack of Muslim women specific programmes, household's responsibilities, poverty, and so on. All these factors are disabling women in general and make their lives deplorable. The study reveals that structural changes such as providing women reservation and economic empowerment alone cannot bring modernization and changes into the lives of Muslim women. Instead of

accusing religion, attention has not been diverted towards proper identification of problems stemming from gender inequality and patriarchy. As already stated, Indian society is based on gender line where marriage, motherhood, child bearing is considered as women's primary occupation, Assamese society is also not different in this regard. In regards of co-education, Assamese Muslim women still hesitate to send their girls to co-ed schools and colleges. It is quite ironical that a woman who could elect a government by casting her vote has to seek permission of her husband in all other matters.

On the basis of the discussion above we can state that the women in general and Muslim women in particular have been dealing with the structures of oppression and patriarchy that are the main stumbling blocks in their progression and development in Assam. This is not only true about Muslim women in Assam but also about the women in general in the developing societies. The level of modernization of the Muslim women in Assam, as already established, is quite low due to the presence of disabling factors among which patriarchy and poverty stand out. The economic dependence in both the districts is high as shown in the table below:

Table 5.1. Economic Dependence of the Respondents in Jorhat and Golaghat

District	Economic Dependence of Respondents	Economic Independence of Respondents
Jorhat	109	91
Golaghat	136	64

The educational standards and their economic performance fall far behind men due to these disabling factors. Their economic dependence reduces them to powerless marionettes that are manipulated by men to even vote in favour of their favourite candidates. This points towards their political disempowerment as well and inherently amounts to their disenfranchisement. So, this argument leads us to question the proposition that religion is the hindrance in the progress of women when in reality the main disabling factor is the patriarchal structure of the society. Although, religion is used to fortify and perpetuate the patriarchy, the religion *per se* does not hinder in any way the progress and development of women. But being part of a religion that is in minority, and the condition of which is in shambles according to several government and non-government reports, creates a web of challenges for women to escape the multiplicity of disabling factors that impede their development.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The first and foremost finding from the study is the lack of academic research on Muslim women in Assam. There is abundance of literature available on Muslims of Assam but the works focussing exclusively on Muslim women are conspicuously absent. There has been the lack of serious academic work on Muslim women to examine the process of modernization among Muslim women in Assam in comparative or absolute terms. The condition of Muslim women in Assam needs more exposure and rigorous scholastic effort so that the glaring picture of Muslim women in Assam will find a way into public discourse. Far from being a public discourse, the issues facing Muslim women are hardly ever discussed in public or in private.

Another finding from the case study is that northeast in general and Assam in particular has always been alienated from the mainstream. In this regard Muslim in India and Muslim women in particular always feel neglected and find themselves in the periphery. In matters of development, Assam is less developed in comparison to other developed states in India. Therefore, the alienation that Assam continues to face is replicated with a more deep and strong alienation of Muslims from the state and its administration. Muslims in Assam are not getting proper opportunity to develop themselves in spite of having willingness to work, education and so on. Lack of women specific policy worsen the condition of Muslim women in Assam. Muslim women are less visible in formal jobs as they are barely able to finish their schooling and remain uneducated leading to their unemployability. Therefore, the high literacy rate among the respondents does not translate into the high employment as shown in table below:

Table 5.2. Status of Literacy and Unemployment among Respondents in Jorhat and Golaghat

District	Literacy Rate among Respondents	Unemployment among Respondents
Jorhat	83%	54%
Golaghat	82%	68%

Thus, to alleviate their conditions, the government becomes responsible to ensure that every girl child is enrolled in the primary schools, and create

conditions that make it possible for them to continue to higher levels. Although merit-cum-means minority scholarships are doled out by the central government, the procedure of applying to these, which is almost always online, remains such that only urban people are able to take hold of these. In order to develop the life of women in general and Muslim women in particular, the state as well as the central government should take these issues seriously and should prioritise the education of Muslim women. This can be done by making a list of achievable goals in the state as well as central budgets and allocating a separate share of money for translating these goals into a reality. However, these things should not happen in a populist manner where the schemes are rolled out and a majority of funds spent on advertisements for benefitting the government in the elections like in the case of 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' scheme. The schemes for alleviating the populations from poverty, illiteracy, and so on should be delinked from populism, and should not be presented as being a gift from government.

Modernization is one of the social phenomena whose utility cannot be delinked from the context, the circumstances, the place, the conditions to which it is applied. If we try to contextualize the modernization in Indian society from the western perspective, then we are going to get a wrong picture of the society that we intend to study. The modernization therefore has been seen as a process that is driven indigenously with reference to the social, political, and economic realities of India. If we try to fit western model of modernization in developing countries like India then the confusion in terms and values is bound to happen. Among the reasons why modernization and westernization have been treated as different categories is the fact that the term west or westernization is bereft of analytical value. It is a hollow term in so far as the 'West' that is referred to is

itself diverse and does not present a singular model that can be held as being ideal-typical for all others to emulate. Western countries are different in their cultural norms, values and circumstances, and have followed different paths in the path to modernizing themselves. India as well is seen by the current study as following its own path of modernization, which though is not without its lapses, and may be greater than the lapses that were encountered by the developed societies. But, although with a critically slow pace, modernization is underway in India and its states. Despite certain dangerous developments on the rise, like that of communalism and parochial nationalism, Indian Muslims and the women belonging to Muslim communities are trying to carve a space for them in the social and political spheres and are mobilising and aggregating their demands. The constitutional and legal structure of India which is essentially secular and progressive is resilient enough to overcome such anomalies. In the sincere implementation of these constitutional ideals of the founders of the constitution lies the key for unbounded modernization that will unleash the forces of inclusive social change.