CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Indian society is an agglomeration of diverse cultures, numerous castes, tribes and ethnic and religious groups. Every religious group has its own historical tradition. "Among the Muslims, religion regulates the sacred and the secular practices. The Muslims by and large accept their religion as unalterable and resist any major innovation."¹ But before going into the details, it is better to have a look at the historical emergence of Islam in India. Secondly, it is necessary to analyse social structure and examine the position of women in the Islamic social structure. Finally, it is important to explain the form and the extent of modernization among the women in general and the Muslim women in particular in India.

Islam was founded by the Prophet Mohammad in the desert of Arabia in 600 A.D. as a reaction to the polytheism of West Asia and spread first among the tribal groups of Arabia.² Originally, it developed to a nomadic society and its social structure was said to be egalitarian in character and was not highly stratified. But when the Prophet came to Madina, the nomadic economic structure of the Islamic society changed

2. Ibid.
into a mercantile agrarian social structure which was more complex in organization. After the death of the Prophet Mohammad, the Khalifa-Khalifas (religious leaders) and the elected senior members of the community (like Qazis and Imams) were mainly instrumental in spreading of Islam to different parts of the world. In this expansion of Islam from Arabia to the other parts of the world, its basic social, economic and political structures got changed. For instance, the egalitarian and democratic structure of power was moulded into a feudal-authoritarian structure during its expansion.

A contradiction between the religious and political elites had emerged due to some political and cultural policies undertaken by the latter which were not approved by the former for not conforming to the religious perspective. According to Singh, "this contradiction still constitutes an important factor in the process of modernization in Islamic societies. The Ulemas (religious elites) as representatives of the Islamic Great Tradition, tend to be conservative and reject innovations which they think are not within the framework of the Islamic tradition."  

However, during the expansion of Islam many structural and cultural features of the different countries were also

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
and innovation would be subversive. " The Muslim rule in India was established in 1191 A.D. with the Delhi sultanate. "The other avenue by which Muslims found their way to India was trade. The first settlement of this immigration of people was from Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, West Asia and Eastern Coast of Africa." 10 From the 11th century onwards people from the Middle East came to India but, as stated above, the Muslim rule was established with the advent of Mughals who held sway over large parts of the country keeping others aside. In many cases the outsiders fought, conquered and brought about a whole new dimension to the existing pattern of behaviour and social structure of Muslims in India.

The expansion of Islam further took place with the conversion of the local people during the Mughal rule in India. Migration of people took place from one part of the country to the other. Through this process of migration the Pathans formed a substantial part of the upper class of the Muslim society all over the country. A group of the Muslim community of Kerala is consisted of immigrants from Deccan. 11


During the Islamic expansion in India, its social structure had already changed. Though the basic concept of equality and universal brotherhood remained as an ideal as stated above, the Muslim society in practice was classified into different grades of people. According to Singh, "the twelfth century Muslim conquerers of India were distinctively divided into priests (including missionaries), nobility (ruling families and administrators) and all others (soldiers, merchants, artisans, etc.)."\(^{12}\) The elites or the priests and nobility constituted the upper class of the Muslim society because they regarded themselves as the direct foreign descents. That is why, they called themselves Ashrafs or the four major immigrant groups of Syed, Sheikh, Mughals and Pathans. These four groups have later developed into a caste structure of the Muslim society. The converted Muslims were considered as non-Ashrafs in India.

During the hey day of the Muslim rule in India Muslims had enjoyed power and patronage at all levels.\(^ {13}\) Their political and religious elites carried forward the Islamic cultural tradition in the protective and optimistic environment. This emerged later into the Sufi tradition which played an important role in the expansion of Islam in India. The main emphasis of the Sufism was on "ascetic personal ethic, ephemerality of material phenomenon and mystical

self-abnegation. It were the Sufis and the literary figures who worked in the earlier years as a bridge between the conquerers and the local masses. Persons like Khwaja Nizamuddin Aulia, Malik Muhammad Jaisi, Kabir, Abdur-Rahim Khan-e-Khana and Amir Khusro were among those who mobilised the masses through their religious preachings and their poetry and songs. They also interpreted, through their poetry and songs, the indigenous tradition to the Muslim world. However, the political elites and the Ulemas were placed in the higher social status because they were actively involved in expanding Islam throughout India. Thus, during the peak period of the stable Muslim rule, the Muslims enjoyed all political, economic, social and religious privileges. They had the lion's share in the services and even, after the eclipse of the Mughal empire, had held high posts under the Marathas.

With the advent of the Britishers, however, all the prestige, privileges and patronage of the Muslims gradually disappeared. The Muslim elites started losing their pre-eminent status. The Muhammadans lost not only politically but in many other ways as well. For example, the reduction of the military establishment of the Nawab of Bengal threw

16. Ibid., p.70.
out of employment a large number of Muhamdans who served in the Nawab's army. The Mughal faujdars were supplemented by European magistrates in 1781. The judges of criminal courts who before 1790 had been exclusively Muhamdans were, as a class, removed by Cornwallis in the Diwani provinces. The operation of the same rule was extended in the North-Western provinces in the beginning of the 19th century. Muhamdian "Qazis" (judges) and "Muftis" (preachers) were of course continued, but the introduction of trial by jury in 1832 and the substitution of Persian by English in 1837 greatly reduced their importance. The posts of law officers were themselves abolished on the establishment of High Courts in 1862. As a result, the social, political and economic statuses of the Muslim elites got changed which made the Indian Muslims more conservative. The loss of political power also made them reluctant towards western civilization as well as acquiring western English education.

During the British rule Lord Macaulay was charged inter alia with laying down the educational policy in British India. He decided that English language should be introduced in India so that the coming generation might accept the English language and culture and help in the administration. With that end in view, he called the Brahmin pandits and the Muslim maulvis and explained to them his

policy. At first instance both of them rejected his policy of accepting the British system of education. But McCaulay requested them to reconsider his proposal. Later the pandits agreed to accept that policy along with Sanskrit but the Maulvis stuck again to the original view of rejecting the introduction of English language. Consequently, the Muslims lagged behind in acquiring knowledge of English, participating in administration, trade and commerce and in coping side by side with the Hindus. Thus, the social, political and economic structures of the Muslim society in India started degrading. When the Indian Muslims realised that they were lagging behind in every fields due to their conservative attitudes, many social reformers started movements to improve the position of Muslims. The Wahabi movement launched by Syed Ahmad Barelve started in 1862 in Lahore and spread all over India. It was mainly a peasants' revolt against rulers but it also had a social stand to protest against the corruption of religion.

THE INTERMINGLING OF HINDU AND ISLAMIC TRADITIONS IN INDIA:

There is no doubt that the traditions of both Hindus and Muslims in India have influenced each other over the


19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.
past several hundred years. Some of the Islamic traditions got assimilated with that of Hindus and vice versa. During the peak of the Muslim rule in India a synthesized culture developed which was neither Hindu nor Muslim. According to Tara Chand, "it was indeed a Muslim-Hindi culture. Not only did Hindu religion, Hindu art, Hindu literature and Hindu science absorb Muslim elements but the very spirit of Hindu culture and the very stuff of Hindu mind were also altered, and the Muslims reciprocated by responding to the change in every department of life."\(^{21}\) The Muslims have been in contact with Hindus for twelve centuries. As a result, the Indian Muslims share most of the basic characteristics like caste, endogamous marriage, etc. with Hindus. Their customs, manners, outlooks of life, etc. are deeply influenced by the Hindu caste organization. The actual social practices of Muslims in India are usually parallel to those of their Hindu neighbours.\(^{22}\) The reasons have been a long established Muslim rule in India, the Muslims' intermingling with Hindus, and a large scale conversion of Hindus to Islam. Today, one may easily notice the different occupational groups among the Muslims who practise endogamous marriage to maintain the purity of their noble class. In the words of Singh, "Even


the pollution-purity norms were practised. Muslim *Bhangis* (sweepers similar to Hindu untouchables) were not allowed to enter mosques for reasons of uncleanness. In marriage, *Jati* endogamy and even hypergamy continued. A hierarchical gradation in social and ritual status thus crept into the social structure of Islam very much on the pattern of Hindu tradition.  

However, the caste groups among the Muslims in India are not strictly the same as these are among Hindus but these are roughly parallel to the caste system of the Hindus. Regarding marriage, customs and family organization, one finds many similarities between the two communities despite the differences in their religion and culture. The Muslims in India have always stood parallel to the Hindu society and have never assimilated themselves in the 'cultural mainstream'. This may be due to the religious constraints as well as differences in culture, attitudes and value system. In this regard, Panikar says that "the Muslims at all times everywhere have been an integrated community separate from others... it is true that under the British at different times the communities (Hindus and Muslims) came together for political action but they remained separate entities, "the two eyes of


India" as Syed Ahmad had declared... As separately organised communities living lives of their own, though neighbours, the influence they exerted on each other was not fundamental.25

Thus, the relationship or the intermingling of these two traditions, as Singh puts it, has always been along "the principle of equilibrium based on power. There was cultural syncretism between Islam and Hinduism but never a mutual cultural acceptance."26 Due to social and psychological reasons, there was a gap between these two traditions in India. As a result, the process of modernization taking place in India has affected them in different manners and to different degrees.

MODERNIZATION OF INDIAN SOCIETY AND THE MUSLIMS:

The Indian society has a long cultural history and many of its social traditions and value systems are deep rooted. Having been globally isolated in the past, she had little interaction with the outside world. It was during the British rule that India was exposed to newer ways of life and influence which brought about some "radical" changes in its society and culture. The foundations of a modern state were slowly laid down in the 19th century when the Britishers established large scale industries, created new political institutions and developed civic life. The British also

introduced a new system of education as mentioned above and opened schools and colleges for all irrespective of caste, religion, sex and race. "The introduction of British education, as expected, was not to revitalize the stagnating Indian society, rather it touched only the periphery and influenced only a small group of society."\textsuperscript{27}

Notwithstanding the ulterior motive of the British "the contact (of Indians with the British) had a special historicity which brought many far reaching changes in culture and social structure of Indian society."\textsuperscript{28} Both Singh and Srinivas have pointed out that the British rule produced radical and lasting changes in Indian society and culture. In the opinion of Srinivas, "It was unlike any previous period in Indian history as British brought with them new technology, institutions, knowledge and values."\textsuperscript{29} Further, "towards the end of 19th century some cultural and structural changes took place which included expansion of western education, urbanization and industrialization, universalistic legal system, development of transport and communication, etc. Structural changes included rational bureaucratic system of administration and judiciary, army and industrial bureaucracy, new class of business elite and entrepreneurs."\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{27} Agrawal, Mamta, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{28} Jain, Sushila, \textit{Muslim and Modernization}, Jaipur: Rawat Publication, 1986, p. 34.

\textsuperscript{29} Srinivas, M.N., \textit{Social Change in Modern India}, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1977, p. 46; See also Singh, Y., \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{30} Singh, Y., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 203.
Thus, with several limitations the British rule produced various forces which set India on the road of modernization.

Over a period of hundred years or so the Indian society has experienced, in one form or the other, the process of modernization. India has also acquired scientific and technological advancement, industrialization and economic development during all these years. Consequently, various institutions, values, attitudes, and behavioral patterns of both males and females belonging to different religious and ethnic communities have witnessed wide ranging changes. Further, with the various socio-political and economic changes there has been a revolutionary progress in the outlook of the people. They have accumulated so many diverse and conflicting ideas that it is very difficult to compartmentalize them. However, the rate of these multi-faceted changes in Indian life has been so slow that after independence the Indian society has found it increasingly difficult to meet the demands of a progressive nation. This has been so due to its social system with rigid ramifications of caste, religion and sex and the attitudinal and institutional inadequacies. "In a country where primitive past and tradition extending to thousands of years are controlling the behaviour of the mass, you cannot put the most up-to-date socio-political ideas without changing the existing attitude and mental make-up of people." 31

Yet, after independence many changes have taken place both in macro and micro-structures which were either absent or slow during the British period. The political structure has further changed with the introduction of adult suffrage and a federal parliamentary system of the people's representation. Besides a number of reforms brought in the Hindu marriage and inheritance law, several community development programmes, land reforms and elective village panchayats have been established so that people could participate in the local level administration. In other words, it can be said that the foundation of modernization which was laid by the Britishers has bloomed after the independence. The traditional Indian society with an agro-handicraft economy, feudal dynastic polity, village community, etc. has undergone a series of changes. Different communities with their religio-philosophical foundations and social structures consisting of primordial social categories have also witnessed this process of change.

In the light of the previous discussion, we shall look here at the modernization of Muslims in India which also goes back to the advent of Britishers. As discussed earlier, the Muslim community reacted in hostile manner to the British rule in early years because of privileges and power being snatched away from the Muslim rulers. They were also not

responding favourably to the educational system led by the Britishers. As a result, their number in services, trade and commerce started decreasing which resulted in further lowering of their economic and educational status. But a group of small number of people within the Muslim community consisting of poets and intellectuals realised the changing values and situations from the very inception of the British regime in India. These included poets like Mirza Ghalib, Altaf Hussain Hali, Md. Iqbal and Ameer Ali; the intellectuals like Abu Talib Landani, Abdur Rahim Dahri, Lutfullah, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and a number of students of Delhi college like Zakaullah, Maulvi Nazir Ahmed, Md Hussain Azad, etc. They felt that the country was on the doorstep of a new era. These people tried to foster the birth of a new culture by assimilating the east and the west. They also tried, through their writings and personal efforts to make improvements in the social and economic conditions of the Muslims by emphasising on the value of English education, western ideas and modern science.  

More precisely, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was not the pioneer of the western education among the Muslims in India as it is generally believed. Before him the above mentioned poets and intellectuals prepared the ground for adoption of modern education and learning of science by the Muslims. They had

revolted against traditionalism of the Islamic social structure in India. It was in the early 19th century when the seed of modernization of Muslims in India was sown which later flourished with the efforts of social reformers like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Moreover, these intellectuals and nobilities were more concerned in reorganising the country on modern and scientific lines. They were also inclined to accord more priority to the tasks of modernization of the Muslims than getting the country out of the British control. 34

Among the poets Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869) was the most radical in his thinking. He gave an indication of his liberal and progressive outlook before 1857 when he advised Sir Syed Ahmad Khan to look forward for popularising modern education and values among the Indian Muslims. He was among the leading poets of his age who openly welcomed the introduction of western learning and values in India. He believed that the glorified memory of the past would be a formidable obstruction in the path of progress of the Muslim community. 35

Like Ghalib, another poet Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914) accepted the transformation of the Indian scene as a challenge and, through his nazams (poems) gave a clarion call to the Muslims to face the challenge. Hali believed

34. Ibid., p.232.
that the salvation of the Muslims lay in imbibing the virtues of western culture and he advised them to avail the opportunity offered by the establishment of the British rule in India. Through his poem - *Filsafa-i Taraggi*, he advised the Muslims to engage themselves in commerce and travel extensively in order to achieve progress. 36 Besides concentrating on the condition of Muslims in general, Hali also showed concern for the deteriorating status of women in the Muslim society. Through his other poems like *Munajat-i Beva* and *Chup ki dad* he highlighted the fact that now the woman had become a mere object or means of man's sexual satisfaction. He wanted women to be restored to their respectability as mothers, sisters, and daughters and, hence, he pleaded for their education. 37 Similarly, Syed Ameer Ali, a poet and a social reformer, tried to remove the prevailing social evils, illiteracy, superstition, etc. from the Muslim society which were big hurdles in its progress. He explained that the Islam was not adverse to be enlightened by rational and scientific outlook in life. On the contrary, it promoted these values and Muhammad, he said, preached the value of knowledge by saying that "the seeker of knowledge will be greeted in heaven with a welcome from the angels. To listen to the words of the learned and to instil into the heart the

37. Ibid., pp. 151-53.
lesson of science is better than religious exercises... (it is also) better than emancipating a hundred slaves. He who honours the learned, honours me."38 Moreover, the Quran itself bears testimony to supreme value of learning and science. Ameer Ali further says that in the opinion of Mohammad, "he (the knowledge seeker) has brought them (Muslims) out of the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge and made them aware of the inestimable blessings of the knowledge of writings."39

Md. Iqbal was another poet and a social reformer who did not consider Muslim law as sacrosant. He believed that "the claim of liberals of the present day generation to reinterpret the fundamental legal principles in the light of their own experiences and the altered condition of Muslim life, in my opinion, is perfectly justified."40 Iqbal demonstrated how the stagnation discernible in Islamic civilization was a temporary phase. He asserted the superiority of Islam as a way of life and emphasized on its certain basic principles like Ijtihad (exertion with a view to forming an independent judgement on legal question) and Ijma (consensus) which the Muslims have used from time to time to adjust

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39. Ibid., p. 361; see also SURA, IQRA from QURAN.

to new conditions and make progress. He also described the contribution of Islamic civilization to human progress. In his words, "the Quran is a book which emphasizes deed rather than idea". He quoted a verse from Quran which says, "Verily God will not change the condition of men till they change in themselves" (Sura 58). He then observed that "the search for rational foundation in Islam may be regarded to have begun with the Prophet himself." His constant prayer was that "God grant me knowledge of the ultimate values of things."41

Like poets, the Muslim intellectuals also were the representatives of the educated segment of the society. They were generally sensitive to the social problems of the Indian Muslims. They were liberal in their outlooks and beliefs and, in the beginning of the 19th century, were fascinated by western education and culture. Unlike the orthodox, these liberal intellectuals cared much for the worldly progress and the material prosperity of the Muslim society. Although they did not ignore religious education for Muslims in quest of material progress, they thought modern education necessary to improve the social and economic conditions of the Muslim society. For instance, Mirza Abu Talib was the first educated and outspoken Muslim who responded favourably to modern education and science. Though he did not launch any reform movement for the modernization of Muslims, he was one of the

first few to set the ball rolling in that direction.\footnote{42} In his writings he appreciated the English system of education, law, constitution and some of the English customs and manners. Abdur Rahim Dahri (1785-1850) was another intellectual who tried to improve the social, economic and educational status of the Indian Muslims by emphasising on the value of modern education and learning of science. About Abdur Rahim’s contribution, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad writes, “that even before Sir Syed Ahmad Khan there were many Muslims, Abdur Rahim being the most prominent, to advocate the learning of the modern science and English language.”\footnote{43} Abdur Rahim wrote a booklet in support of the view that the Muslims should adopt the new learning. He believed that a revolution had come about in the field of knowledge. The only way to progress, according to him, was to accept the new learning instead of adhering exclusively to the traditional learning.

Likewise, Maulvi Nazir Ahmad (1836-1912) wanted to remove illiteracy from the Muslim community. He emphasized on the need to acquire western learning. He was in favour of two types of education for Muslims - one which developed the rational faculties of man and helped him in achieving material progress through a mastery of the physical sciences and the rational sciences, and the other which refined

\footnote{42. \textit{Ashraf, M., \textit{Op. Cit.}, p.217.}}
cultural life through a grounding in religion. He felt that the Muslims should come forward and acquire the knowledge of science but not at the cost of their religious and cultural education. In his writings like "Ijthad" and "Mubadil al-Hukma" he tried to change the Muslim opinion in favour of acquiring scientific knowledge. Like Nazir, Zakaullah (1832-1910) also pleaded the Muslims to adopt and acquire western education to come out of their backwardness. He regarded western education necessary for development and progress of the Muslim society.

A much more powerful attempt to regenerate the Muslim society and to ameliorate the miserable condition of Muslims in India was made by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-98) who hailed from a noble family located in Delhi. His aim was to persuade Muslims to acquire western knowledge through education in the institutions that were being set up otherwise they would deprive themselves of the means of survival. He was of the opinion that western education was a tool for an all round progress of the Muslims of India. He believed that it would be possible for the Muslims to achieve social and political progress only if they learnt English and western science. In his opinion, the Muslim system of education had become obsolete and did not help scientific

44. Mujeeb, A., op. cit., p. 231.
45. Ibid., p. 228.
development in any manner. He wanted the traditional culture in India to assimilate with the modern technological age. He persuaded the Muslims to adjust themselves to the new reality of the British rule and be receptive to the good aspects of the western culture. He tried to popularise English education because he thought that this was the only way to improve the social and economic conditions of Indian Muslims. With these views in mind, he established the Aligarh College in 1875 which later became Aligarh Muslim University.

The Muslim orthodoxy had, however, opposed all efforts of the poets, intellectuals and reformers to make improvement in the educational and economic status of the Indian Muslims. The conservative elements among Muslims expressed no interest in acquiring western education and those who had taken such education were declared Kafirs (one who does not believe in Islam). The Ulemas preached a religious war (Jihad) against the new ideas drawn from the west. But here too the individual efforts and the reform movements were divided into two groups. One group of reformers wanted reforms in a liberal and peaceful manner while the other group was more radical and militant. The former type of reforms was activated by Shah Walliullah, Abdul Aziz and his disciple Sheikh Karamat Ali. All of them appealed for peaceful religious reform by reinterpreting Jihād of the tradition in accordance with the modern needs. The latter type of movement was

supported by Syed Ahmad Barelvi and Shariatullah. They considered the movement as *jihad* and condemnation of the British regime, for them, was a religious war zone. But in the 19th and 20th centuries the westernised elites and nobilities, as mentioned earlier, had different views on how to get freedom and break all the un-Islamic traditions and practices. The nobility and the elite of this group were sensible to the changing values from the very beginning of the British rule in India because they had an open mind. They were in touch with secular knowledge and were not much conservative in religious matters. They advocated for western education and learning of science.

However, the various religious leaders or *ulemas*, being conservative (and they continue to be so even today) and reluctant to make any change, commanded much influence over the masses. Most of the Muslims in India were ignorant and illiterate and were always dependent upon *ulemas* for guidance. Being economically backward and politically deprived, the Muslim masses could not be aroused except through an appeal to their religious susceptibilities. As a result, the masses did not respond to the modern education and learning of science as advocated by the liberal intellectuals and reformers. “Resistance has been specially stronger from the lower level of these elite (Bazar *małyis*).”\(^4^8\) The Muslim intelligentsia currently constitute a minority of the community and

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48. Ibid.
are in a dilemma over mobilising the Muslims to come out of
their old un-Islamic practices and misconceptions of Islam
and to adopt the process of modernisation for coping with
the changing situation. That is why, the efforts of the
reformers and intellectuals in the past or even today do
not seem to be fruitful as compared to those in other com-
munities. Besides this, other factors like rational critical
approach to life,49 which is a fundamental characteristic
of Islam, importance of community rather than individuality,50
lower economic and educational status of the Muslim masses,51
their minority complex,52 personal law,53 etc. are also
responsible for the non-responsiveness of the Indian Muslims
to the process of modernisation. Yet, the fact remains that
a limited degree of modernisation has taken place among them
in general and among their women in particular which is discus-
sed in the following section.

49. Saiyed, A.R., "Indian Muslims and some problems of
modernization: A theoretical exploration" in M.N.
Srinivas et. al. (eds.), Dimensions of Social Change

50. Shah, A.B., Challenge and Secularism, Bombay: Nachiketa,
1969, p. 63.


52. Ibid., pp. 223-25.

53. Ibid., pp. 236-38.
MUSLIM WOMEN THROUGH AGES:

It would be better if a brief account of women in general and of the Muslim women in particular relating to the traditional, medieval and the modern periods in India is given. It is interesting because India was invaded by different rulers in the past. These invasions had definitely influenced the Indian women who were also affected all along by the different religious and social reform movements carried out from time to time. We may first have a brief look at the status of women in the pre-Islamic or traditional period in India.

When Islam appeared in Arabia, women held a very low position in the society.\(^{54}\) They were not only regarded as socially inferior but were also treated like slaves and chattels. "Marriage was contracted on payment of a bride price. The women did not hold any definite status either in society or in their own family. The women of Arabia were in a state of subjection either to their nearest male kinsmen or the father, brother, son or husband whose rights over them were regarded as their rights over any other property."\(^{55}\) It was a mark of dishonour for any man to have a daughter; hence, the custom of female infanticide

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in the past. Marriage by capture, purchase and contract existed among the Arabs at that time. Polygamy was both popular and common among them. In regard to divorce, the husband was free to divorce his wife whenever he felt like doing so. There was no reciprocal right for the wife.  

However, it was the teaching of the prophet which dispelled the prevailing idea that women were inferior to men or that female children deserved treatment different from that meted to the male children. The Prophet also proclaimed that the "paradise lays under the feet of mother."

Islam improved the status of women in many respects through a variety of reforms instituted by the Prophet Mohammad. It also improved their position by restricting polygamy to four wives, assigning a share of in habitatance to women by declaring Mehr (a gift offered to bride) and re-orienting the Arab laws of marriage and divorce. It contributed to the improvement of their position by prohibiting female infanticide and allowing women to hold any public office including that of the head of an empire or minister or judge (only for essential needs). It facilitated them to remarry after divorce (only after iddat period i.e. three menstrual months) and, lastly, it encouraged them to study and acquire knowledge. The Islamic writers have emphasized

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on the basis of Qurān and Sunnah (voluntary deeds) and other religious books that a woman is not treated badly in Islam. Mohammad Qutab is of the opinion that "...as fundamental principle of its system, Islam holds that woman is a human being and she has a soul similar to that of a man." 59

Coming to the Indian scene, women in the Vedic period were free and enjoyed equal status with their menfolk. Neither seclusion nor early marriage was prevalent during this period. Women were allowed to have their say in selection of mates and a widow was allowed to remarry. 60 They had also share in the parental property. 61 In the whole, in this period the position of women was high within the framework of a patriarchal society. However, in the post-Vedic period the position of women started degrading gradually. The laws of Manu dictated that "A woman should never be independent. Her father has authority over her in childhood, her husband has authority over her in her youth and in old age, her son has authority over her" (Dhamashastra IX, 3). 62 The greater significance was attached to a male child (which continues even today). Early marriage became a common

61. Cf. ibid., p.17.
practice and the religious privileges as well as freedom of
movement of women became restricted. Thus, the position of
women became so inferior that widows were burnt alive on
the pyre of their dead husbands. 63

Historically, since the invasion of Muslims on India
in the 11th century varieties of new elements had been
introduced into the structure of social values prevalent
in the country. 64 With this the Muslim social structure
has accorded to women the right to divorce and right of
social equality particularly the sanctity of motherhood.
But it has also imposed on Muslim women a system of seclusion -
the purdah which has no sanction in Islam. Nevertheless,
the system has developed over a long period of time and
has been crystallized, at present, as a tradition of
Muslims in India. During the medieval period purdah or
seclusion was found particularly among high and well-to-
do Muslim families. The practice was looked upon as a symbol
of respectability. But during the same period the birth
of a girl in a Muslim family was regarded as an unfortunate
and unpleasant event. Early marriage also became a common
practice during this period. As regards the settlement of
marriage, it was entirely the concern of the parents of
both sides who agreed to the conditions of the contract
and fixed the date of marriage. 65

63. Roy, S., op. cit., p.17.
64. Sridevi, S., op. cit., p.2.
65. Menon, I., op. cit., p.17.
When the Britishers came to India, they did not apparently introduce any change in the status of women. The reason was that they were not interested in the reforms of Indians per se. These reforms were albeit carried out by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, M.G. Ranade, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Annie Besant, etc. Ranade and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan tried to change the public opinion regarding child marriage and women's education. The latter pointed out that "while Islam has given equal status in law and religion to men and women, the position of Muslim women in fact is miserable. In the western countries while the legal and religious status of women is lower, their social status is very high and men treat them with the greatest courtesy and consideration. Muslims should, therefore, live up to the standard and give women in law as well as in fact the status accorded to them by Islam."  

By the end of the 19th century the social reformers and the political leaders realised the importance of women's education and employment. They were prompted by the fact that the women with economic independence could help in the betterment of national economy as well as could become an asset in the fight of liberation from the British. With establishment of Women's Association in 1917 many women,

67. Mujeeb, M., op. cit., p.86.
including some Muslim women, came out of their houses and joined the freedom movement. Therefore, "the political movement for freedom of India acted as a primary factor for the improvement of the status of women in India in general and of Muslim women in particular." 68

It was only after independence that some changes have systematically come in the life of Indian women due to educational facilities and constitutional guarantees. But these have largely failed to liberate them from their traditional way of life. In spite of their rights given in the Constitution or a number of facilities provided to them, their status is low. There are various reasons responsible for it. The Indian society, by and large, accepts a sharp distinction between men's and women's spheres. There are separate roles assigned traditionally for both the sexes. For instance, the primary role of a woman is considered to be that of home maker, bringing up children and doing the household chores. Despite women's taking up jobs outside the homes, the strict segregation of roles prevents them from being both economically and mentally independent. Inadvertently, the overall development of women is hampered and they have to depend on men for security reason and in decision making.

Moreover, the social structure of our country does not promote social change easily. Religion and philosophy

are the two important pivots of Indian life; so much so due to their impact, most of the people are unable to question the age-old dogmas. "The social structure of our country is not conducive to economic development and economic planning... It has lone efficiency for change. Indian culture bears a heavy burden of fatalism, and the passivity of masses is proverbial." In such an environment women find it difficult to adopt change and they cling to traditional values. Thus, the Indian women today, irrespective of their religion, do not enjoy equal status with their menfolk. What is written in law is hardly seen in practice. However, the equal status of men and women can be realised only when there is change in the attitudes of people and in the level of their social awareness.

Due to the socio-economic development some changes can be noticed in the social structure of the country. Educational development has also affected the attitudes of the people. It is the impact of education that the women are not confined to the four walls of the house but are in contact with the philosophy of liberation and the democratic tradition of the west. Due to these developments their roles have been expanded and they have become aware of their rights and status. Their self-assertion can only change

their status and facilitate them to avail of their constitutional rights. In this respect, certain questions are important to ask: "Whether the Indian woman has the wisdom and discrimination to distinguish between what to respect and what to reject, whether she is able to achieve a harmonious synthesis between the best of our traditions and the most desirable of modern?"  

After Independence the significant changes that have taken place for the betterment of women did not affect the lot of the Muslims in the country. This has been mainly because the Muslim community as such was, at the time of transfer of political power, more involved and concerned over the partition of the country on the basis of religion. Much later, the Muslims in general and their women in particular have started realising their own stagnated state of existence in comparison to the men and women of the other non-Muslim communities who, in the meantime, have taken advantage of their better social standing. This realisation along with many exogenous factors like formal education, employment, freedom of movement, social equality, etc. have brought about meaningful changes in the condition of some of the Muslim families also in the present time. However,


the poor economic condition of a large number of Muslim families makes it necessary for their women to work out for their livelihood and for supplementing their family income.

Thus, it can be said that the modernization process presumably started with the advent of the Britishers in India has affected Muslims in general and their women in particular in the country to the extent that it has created a small coterie of the elite. In fact, the general masses among the Muslims did not respond to this process immediately mainly due to insecure feeling and a fear of religious backlash. Many reformers and intellectuals tried to bring about changes in the Muslim social structure. The pace of change and modernization among the Muslim women has started accelerating, especially after independence, with the onset of a freer society and intermingling with their comparatively more emancipated sisters of other communities. Also, with the emerging process of industrialisation, urbanization, scientific and technological development, the Indian Muslim women are gradually joining the mainstream of the national life with the twin armour of education and employment.