The foregoing study highlights the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of Muslim womanhood in medieval period of Indian history. The analysis takes into account the Islamic heritage on one hand and the impact of Hinduism and its evil practices on the other. The changing status of Muslim women, both, in ideology and in practice, emerges clearly.

In the social context, the overall position of Muslim women was dismal. Barring her role as a mother where she commanded universal respect, she had a subservient position in social hierarchy. In those warring times, there was universal craving for a son. Daughters were a security risk and a liability for the Muslims. Birth of a daughter was, therefore, unwelcome for the Muslims, both rulers and the ruled. They were married at very early age, though this age was slightly higher for the aristocratic classes. Child marriage retarded physical and mental development of the women. They were discriminated against even in celebrations of birth and death. The Muslims also adopted the dowry system of the Hindus. Daughters, therefore, became undesirable. The permission of divorce by Muslim society and its practice brought respite to some Muslim ladies. However, not many of them moved to courts for seeking divorce because of their weak social position. The male dominance and general social set up dwarfed their personality. On account
of the prevailing polygamy, the women had to bear with neglect and apathy even if they were not divorced by their husbands. There were instances when divorced wives were also kept by their erstwhile husbands even after the period of *iddat*. The institution of divorce, therefore, lost its value. It became rare under the Hindu impact. The practice of re-marriage, as allowed by Islam, was followed in the beginning. Gradually, it also relegated to the background under the influence of Hinduism. Polygamy was a way of life with the affluent class, the number only varying according to the means, the requirement and the fancy of the man. The agricultural and labour class practised monogamy. Among other Muslim population, polygamy though followed, yet came to be discouraged gradually. The Hindu practices of *sati* and *jauhar* made inroads into the Islamic practices, but they were not popular.

A woman within the house was considered man’s possession. She was even sold for paying off taxes. Confined within her home, she had no other vocation in life except bearing and rearing of children and managing the home. Many restrictions were placed on them which became stricter with increasing moral degradation of the society. Too many checks on them caused aberrations in their behaviour and deterioration in their moral values. Such tendencies grew more as the restrictions imposed on women increased over a period of time. The common Muslim women generally safeguarded their chastity. The general sensual appeal
brought a thriving business for the prostitutes and dancing and singing girls. Prostitution was taken as a necessary evil, yet the profession was not considered honourable. Gradually the society developed tolerance for the harlots and they came to be patronized by the royalty and the aristocracy. The dancers and singers also enjoyed this patronage. They acquired proficiency professionally, but morally they had to go down because of moral decline of their patronizing masters. The menial female slaves were not treated well. But those, who were kept for entertainment, tried to catch the fancy of their masters. Some of them succeeded and were able to rise to become centre of power in the later Mughal period. As for widows, they had soft corner. The Kings, queens and nobles provided for their living. The general behaviour towards the female relations was, more or less, good. Women were considered the honour of the house and the man was to defend her. At times, she was also equated with social honour. However, the Muslim rulers were generally harsh towards the ladies of their opponents, irrespective of religion. There were some instances of good treatment meted out to them but this reflected only the individual mood and not the general attitude of the society towards women. In general social estimation, they ranked very low and were considered helpless, dependent, short-sighted, cowardly and fit only for sensual entertainment.

The right of maintenance provided to the Muslim women by the Qoran was followed by the Muslim society of medieval
India. Some of the Kings provided for the needy women by way of bestowal of jagirs, suyurghal grants (madad-i-maash), wazifa, land grants and right of collection of land revenue. Madad-i-maash grants originated with Mughals and could not be sold or transferred except through inheritance. They were so extensive that Aurangzeb laid down a code of inheritance. The Kings along with many nobles and royal ladies extended help to the destitute women financially. The ladies getting maintenance generally obeyed their masters. Such a surety of maintenance led to a sense of complacence among women which smothered their quest for higher attainments.

Mahr was another economic right of Muslim women provided by the Qoran. In the early medieval period, the mahr was fixed at a low amount and hence, was paid in practice also. But gradually, as the mahr amount became high, the practice lost its importance and mahr became just a phony promise seldom fulfilled.

As regards the property rights, Muslim women owned and inherited property during this period. Some of the Sultans followed Shariat law in this regard, but mostly Islamic rules were disregarded. The inheritance depended on the influence of the lady concerned or on the local customs. Often they did not receive their share unless there were no close male relatives or the parents were very wealthy. They could not afford to be assertive because of their weak position. Even those who inherited, their rights were, generally, infringed and women were not in a position to
defend them. In most of the cases wherein courts were approached for redressal, it was done mainly by their male guardians or male relatives. The society considered it worthy of a woman to remain in seclusion rather than to have economic independence. Many lower and middle class ladies came out of their houses for earning their living by working with others or through independent professions. They could not get a social standing for themselves in spite of their economic viability because of prevalence of purdah. The Mughal ladies involved themselves in high-stake trades. But, the society did not look at it disparagingly. Their economic affluence and social aloofness generated awe and respect. The ladies also collected wealth through gifts and gratifications, their possessions varying according to their economic and political involvement, closeness to the ruler and the period to which they belonged. The Muslim ladies of the Mughal time were much richer than their counterparts in the Sultanate period.

The men of royalty and nobility maintained harem. In the pre-Mughal period large harem was considered a status-symbol. The Sultans and nobles maintained big harems to enhance their prestige. Some of the Sultans even framed rules for harmonious living within their harem and also for safeguarding its seclusion. During Mughal times, Babur and Humayun had small harems. With the coming of Akbar, the practice of keeping large harems was restored. He greatly improved upon the existing harem-management and organization. Dwelling was provided to all inmates of the
harem, the size and type of accommodation depended upon the position of a particular lady within the seraglio. These women in harem had a very circumscribed life. They were lavishly provided. They squandered their time and money in wearing costly clothes, using various toilets and adornments, celebrating fairs and festivals and involving themselves in interior decorations, feastings, music, dance and other recreations. The Mughal ladies found time for going on excursions. They had fun in the celebration of Khushroz. They preferred everything fine, gilded, silvered, jewelled or precious stone-studded. In all their activities, ostentation was conspicuous. They enjoyed high sounding epithets to be added to their names. Such pomp and show was more marked during the time of the Mughals than that of the Sultanate period; particularly during the reign of Shah Jahan onwards till the depletion of royal treasury in the later Mughal period. The male master remained the pivot of their activities. It was their constant endeavour to remain ever-attractive for him. Women in harem were not sure of conjugal fidelity. They indulged in drinking and other vices. In short, they had all glamour and luxury. Yet, they could not carve out a permanent social standing for themselves. Whatever status they enjoyed, depended either on their affluence or on the social position of their master. Any variation in these two factors led to a change in their social recognition. At last, when both, power and pelf, deserted the royalty, their ladies also lost their
position. The nobility, dependent on the royalty for its affluence and power also faded away with the passage of time.

Purdah and seclusion of women had become a part and parcel of Muslim society. It was considered a symbol of social prestige and a sign of modesty and decency. The women of higher strata of society were, therefore, very rigid about its observance. Purdah norms were generally strict during the Sultanate period; became relaxed during the time of Babur and Humayun; again became stringent from the reign of Akbar and were severest during the reign of Aurangzeb. In the later Mughal period, purdah came to be observed within the harem also because of presence of Khanazads, Salatins and other na-mahram relations. The ladies of economically backward classes never observed purdah. They had to come out in order to earn their living. They only observed ghunghat (covering of head and a part of the face with dupatta or any other cloth) whenever they met a stranger. The other Muslim women, by and large, supported veil. The contemporary chroniclers eulogized purdah. Some of the Kings, both of Sultanate and the Mughal periods brought ordinances to ensure observance of purdah and seclusion of the women. The practice proved most damaging for the overall development of the Muslim ladies. They were deprived of education and were prevented from mixing with the outside world. This retarded their mental growth, damaged their physical health, blunted their faculties, limited their horizon and made them susceptible to all
sorts of superstitions and taboos.

The Muslim women of royalty and nobility influenced the politics of the time. The early Turks accepted the sovereignty of Razia outwardly because of the impact of Persian norms which recognized a lady-sovereign. But, inwardly, they remained averse to the idea of a lady ruling them. The Afghans, generally kept their women in the background, yet allowed some participation. The policy of the Mughals was different. They never allowed the right of sovereignty to a lady. Even Jahangir guarded it jealously. But, beyond this, they were much more liberal than their counterparts in the Sultanate period. In the Sultanate period, except for Razia and a few others, the ladies mostly acted through their husbands or wards and were mainly involved in succession feuds or as reconciliators or instigators. During the Mughal time, many ladies were involved in active politics and administration and many others in reconciliatory role. The extent of this influence varied from one lady to the other depending upon the thrust of their individual personalities and the outlook of the reigning King. The nature of their impact, good or bad, also depended on the upbringing and insight of the lady concerned. In the early medieval period, the ladies of royal blood dominated the scene. But, during the later Mughal period, the dancing and slave girls outwitted the royal ladies. They exploited the prevailing licentiousness among the royalty and came to the fore-front in the political
field. They indulged in nepotism, court machinations and open gratification. They caused great harm to the decaying Mughal empire.

Muslim women remained backward in the sphere of education. They were mainly taught the tenets of Islam and the practical arts like cooking, stitching, embroidery concerning their household duties. Only a few of the privileged ladies from among the royalty and nobility, particularly during the Mughal period, were fortunate to get education in subjects other than these. Razia and Bibi Raji patronized education during Sultanate period. Among the Mughals, many ladies maintained big libraries and were proficient in Persian and Arabic, Calligraphy, tenets of Islam, composition of Hindi, Persian and Arabic poetry. They also patronized men of letters. The Kings of the Sultanate period were more conservative in their outlook and no mention is found about any general system of educating harem ladies. The Mughals started a regular system of imparting rudimentary knowledge to the ladies of the royal harem through the person of the school mistress called Atun mama. They also recognized the talents of the ladies not born in high families. Education of the common Muslim ladies remained, largely, a private affair and the state did not pay much attention towards it. Even none of the ladies of royalty, who otherwise worked for general educational development of men, ever thought of working exclusively for the promotion of the education of the fair sex. Consequently, educational opportunities for the Muslim
ladies remained deficient.

Within the family sphere, the common women practised folk art and craft and, at times, their creations were of great artistic value. Yet, they could not attain the desired social recognition. The ladies of higher strata got wider opportunities and large resources for their cultural pursuits. Their achievements in the Sultanate period are not known. But some of the Mughal ladies produced works of creative art. They introduced new fashions and designs in dresses and ornaments, invented new perfumes, wrote books, constructed magnificent buildings and developed majestic gardens. Such pursuits earned for them a status in society and a name in history. In the religious field, the ladies of well-to-do class undertook hajj though such pilgrimage was discouraged after Akbar due to Portuguese threat in the Arabian Sea. The visits to mazars of the pirs was also popular among Muslim ladies of all classes and clime. There were also Muslim ladies turning joginis. Sufi fold was the only exception wherein women were given equal opportunities, along with men, for spiritual attainments. There were many lady mystic Sufi saints who got highest regard and recognition in society. However, Sufism did not allow spiritual succession to women.

Economic affluence, purdah and the class to which one belonged were the three factors which had direct effect on the status that the Muslim women enjoyed in society. Since money was mainly concentrated in the hands of the upper
class of society, the ladies of this class were rated high in the scale. Similarly, the ladies who could maintain their seclusion, earned social respect for themselves. Others, who came out because of their economic need, became an object of social apathy. As a class, the women of the royalty and nobility got the highest social recognition till they possessed pelf and position. Even breaking of purdah norms by some of them was overlooked by the society. Their involvement in trade-activities was also not viewed adversely. Their commercial activities were of a high order and remained beyond the reach and comprehension of common Muslim folks.

Purdah, lack of proper education and over-sensuality of that period left a permanent mark on the development of the Muslim women and affected adversely their social status. Their seclusion and educational backwardness rendered them helpless and dependent. The prevailing polygamy and over-sensuality of the people made them mere instruments of sexual gratification. The result was that the purdah rules were made stringent. The very birth of a girl became unwelcome and their existence a burden. This brought in its trail the evil practices like early marriages, premature maternity, untimely aging and growing female mortality. Some of the Muslim rulers like Ala-ud-din Khalji, Firoz Shah Tughlaq, Sher Shah Suri, Akbar and Aurangzeb made some efforts to ameliorate the condition of women. Their impact was negligible.