

Social and Economic status of Women in Pre-Islamic Arabia

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Abstract:

The period preceding the rise of Islam is commonly Known as “Jahiliyah” or age of ignorance. In this period Social, political and religions condition of Arabia were the worst order. In this circumstances social and economic status of women were highly variable, largely dependent on the tribe and region in which they lived. On the other hand women were confined in the pretext of the family and did not have any share in the Social activities. Besides women were also excluded from inheriting property and their testimony was often disregarded in the court. Accordingly birth of a female infant was the cause of grief and poverty. Besides, female children had no inheritance rights as they were unable to protect the family and tribe in warfare. In pre-Islamic Arabia, polygamy and polyandry were prevalent in the tribal society. A man could have unlawful relations with a number of sweethearts in the society. Likewise, a woman could have two or more husbands at the same time. In addition, women were sold in the commercial market to wealthy merchants. Also, some poor debtors who could not pay their money to the money-lenders eventually sold their wives and daughters to the usurers out of fear of ill-treatment and severe harassment.

Keywords: Ignorance, Region, Testimony, Polygamy, Ill-treatment

Social Status of Women:

Arabia before the advent of Islam was a place of challenge where life was shaped by the harsh desert and annoyed political landscapes. During the age of ignorance, most of the Arabs lived in tribal communities. In the absence of any centralized government, these tribes were always in conflict with each other at the slightest pretext.

In such an unfavourable environment, women occupied a marginalized position in the society of nomadic Bedouin tribes. Women had no social rights and no social respect in the tribal society. From the historical point of view, most of the Arabs were nomadic Bedouin tribes. During the days of ignorance, women's status varied widely according to the laws and cultural norms of the tribes in which they lived. Accordingly, tribal law among the nomadic Bedouin tribes determined the rights of the women. Besides, laws and customs of this tribal society were quite different from one area to another. For this reason, different pictures of women's status were seen in this period. On the one hand, there are indications that women of high class held a high position in the society. They freely chose their husband and ran their business in the market. Accordingly, they enjoyed the right to divorce and could return to their own people if they were not happy.

But except for the high influential family and high class women, almost all of the women living in nomadic Bedouin tribes were treated by most of the Arabs as cattle and inferior beings. The majority of women were confined to the context of the family. They did not have any share in the social activities. A woman's primary social duty was to produce children, particularly male heirs who could defend the tribe from the attack of other tribes in battle. At that time, the birth of a male infant was more valuable than that of a female in a certain family of Arab society. On the other hand, when a father was informed of the birth of a daughter, his face would turn pale with grief and anger. At the same time, female infanticide was prevalent among them. Being afraid of poverty or fear of disgrace, the fathers took their infant daughters to the deserts to bury them alive. In this regard, it is stated in the Holy Qur'an — "And kill ye not your children for fear of poverty. We provide them with livelihood, and you also. Surely killing them is a heinous sin."

Moreover, the dowry system for marriage was prevalent in the Arab society before the arrival of Islam. The dowry system fundamentally functioned as a "bride-price" known as mahr. Besides, mahr was viewed as compensation to the father or male guardian for the loss of The woman's labour and her departure from the tribe.

Accordingly, women had no right in respect of divorce. It completely depended upon the hands of men. Women were subordinate to their husbands' authority. They were considered the property of men and divorce was seen as a social loss for the husband.

Moreover, polygamy was prevalent among the Arabs in the Age of Ignorance.

In this connection, a man could have unlawful relations with a number of sweethearts.

While married women were allowed by their husbands to conjugate with others for the sake of offspring. Apart from The girls of coquettish disposition often used to go to the outskirts of the city where they allowed the menfolk to take full liberty with them. Another shameful matter was that stepmothers were married to their sons and sometimes sisters were also used to be married to brothers. Likewise, polyandry prevailed in the society. A woman could have two or more husbands at the same time.

Slavery was also in vogue among the Arabs. They treated the slaves most inhumanly. Enslaved women formed... some poor Arabs sold their women to the wealthy merchants as slaves for mitigating their need. Besides, enslaved women were widely treated as the sexual property of their enslavers as well.

In pre-Islamic Arabia a woman's testimony was not recognised in the court. In the nomadic Bedouin tribes, legal and civil disputes were handled by male tribal leaders. Thus, women's rights in legal cases like civil or criminal were severely limited.

Another noted matter in pre-Islamic Arabia was that a man could marry a widow without offering her (mahr), a new bride-price.

Status of women in Arabia during the age of ignorance:-

during the age of ignorance in Arabia women's status varied widely according to the laws and cultural norms of the tribes in which they lived. In the prosperous southern region of the Arabian Peninsula, for example, the religious edicts of Christianity and Judaism held sway among the Sabians and Himyarites. In other places, such as the city of Mecca, and in the nomadic Bedouin tribes, tribal law determined women's rights. Therefore, there was no single definition of the roles played and rights held by women before the advent of Islam.

The Control of Tribal System on Women:-

The tribe was a unit by itself, and regarded every other tribe as an enemy, unless they had forged alliances to protect one another. There was no centralized infrastructure to protect people and their property. In order to survive, every individual had to be affiliated with a tribe. Although some form of customary arbitration existed between different tribes, both Bedouins as well as the settled populations of Mecca and Medina often resorted to warfare as a means of settling disputes and maintaining order.

Laws and customs in this tribal society varied from one area to another. For this reason, we find different accounts of women's status during the days of Jahiliyyah. On the one hand, there are indications that women held high positions in the society and exerted great influence. They could freely chose their husbands, enjoy the right to divorce, and return to their own people if they were not happy or well-treated. In some cases, they even proposed marriage. They were regarded as equals, not as slaves and were the inspiration of many poets and warriors.

Before Islam the advent of Islam Arabia was a society having no rules, except that the strong dominated the weak. It seems reasonable to expect that a natural byproduct of such society would be the oppression of women. In fact, alongside the examples of strong and independent women, there are numerous reports of women having an inferior status. Female infanticide, for instance, was practiced by fathers who did not value their daughters as much as they valued their sons. In areas, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, women were often deprived of their basic rights- to choose their husbands freely, to divorce if ill-treated or to inherit from their families.

Female Infanticide:-

There is no doubt that Arabs committed infanticide before Islam. It was not a new thing nor was it limited to one group of tribes. Young girls were usually the victims of this dreadful practice. It was said proverbially, "The dispatch of daughters is a kindness" and "The burial of daughters is a noble deed." In Arabia, as among other primitive people, child-murder was carried out in such a way that no blood was shed, the infant was buried alive. Often the grave was ready by the side of the bed on which the daughter was born.

Female infanticide was usually prompted by one of two reasons: fear of poverty or fear of disgrace. The first reason is associated with the frequent famines caused by lack of rain and the fear of poverty that would result from providing for girls who were viewed as less productive than boys. Fathers were afraid that they would have useless mouths to feed, since daughters were considered mere "ornaments," as

pointed out in the Quran. The Quran admonishes the Arabs against killing their children for fear of poverty and promises sustenance for them:

Hence, do not kill your children for fear of poverty: it is we who shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily, killing them is a great sin. (17:31)

The second reason for infanticide is a perverted sense of pride on the part of the fathers who wanted to avoid shame and disgrace, should their daughters be captured by the enemy in war, a common occurrence at that time. The murder of female children for fear of disgrace began with Qais Bin Assem, a leader of Tamim.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the murder of a daughter to avoid shame, under the horrible circumstances described in this story, is altogether different from the ordinary type of infanticide practiced on newborn infants in primitive nations. This suggests that the two motives for infanticide were unrelated. The scarcity of food during famines had perhaps more to do with the origin of infanticide than family pride, since the nomads of Arabia suffered constantly from hunger during most of the year. The only persons who had enough to eat were great men, and it was them who, following Qais's precedent, killed their daughters out of pride.

Marriage system in Arabia before Islam:-

Based on the literary sources as well as the forbidden marriages mentioned in the Quran and sunna, it is likely that the following forms of marriage existed in pre-Islamic Arabia at one time or another, before the advent of Islam

Marriage by agreement –

This was usually an agreement between the man and the woman's family. If the husband was from another tribe, the woman often left her family and found a permanent home in her husband's tribe. The tribe which received the woman kept her children, unless there was a special contract to restore the offspring of the marriage to the mother's people. The children were, therefore, of the tribe's kin and not of the mother's. In some other tribes, it was customary that the woman did not leave her own tribe but either married someone within the tribe or married a stranger who agreed to stay with her family. In this case, the children belonged to the mother's tribe and grew up under their protection. The women of these tribes enjoyed more freedom, and had the right to dismiss their husbands at will.

Marriage by capture –

This was a universal practice before Islam. In times of war, women were often captured and taken to the slave market of a trading place such as Mecca and sold into marriage or slavery. It was Islam that made women immune to attack or capture in war time. In this marriage, the woman followed her husband, and bore children who belonged to him. She became his property and completely lost her freedom. Her husband had absolute authority over her, including the exclusive right to divorce. Accordingly, in this kind of marriage, which has been classified as a "marriage of dominion" ("Ba'al"), the husband was called the woman's lord or owner, not just in Arabia but also among the Hebrews.

Marriage by purchase

In this marriage, the woman's family gave her away for a price, also called the dowry ("mahr"), which usually consisted of camels and horses. It replaced marriage by capture when the tribes began developing friendly relations, but it brought the woman practically into the same oppressive conditions as a captive wife. The emergence of this type of marriage perhaps contributed to the decline of female infanticide. Selling a daughter for a large dowry became much more profitable than burying her in the ground.

Marriage by inheritance

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This was a widespread custom throughout Arabia, including Medina and Mecca, whereby the heir of the deceased inherited his wife. He could then keep her as a wife, give her away in marriage for a dowry or forbid her from remarriage altogether. This marriage was practiced mostly by strangers and travelers, and in return for a price payable by the man to the woman. Because of this price, the woman could not dismiss her husband for a certain length of time that she had agreed to upon marriage. Polygamy (marrying more than one wife) was also commonly practiced, not just by the Arabs but Jews and Christians as well. It is reported that a man could have as many as 100 wives. There are also indications that polyandry (marrying more than one husband) existed which had its roots in an ancient, defunct matriarchal culture. Wife-lending was a practice whereby husbands allowed their wives to live with "men of distinction" to produce noble offspring. The husband, who abstained while his wife lived with the other man, would then be socially considered the father of the child. In some tribes, service marriage was common. When a man was unable to pay the dowry, he agreed to serve the girl's father or kin for a period of time sufficient to earn the bride price. In experimental cohabitation, allowed in some tribes, men could live with young women before marriage. If they liked each other, they would enter into a marriage agreement. Otherwise, there was no commitment on either side.

Divorce system in pre Islamic Arabia:

As marriage was often an arrangement between the husband and the woman's father, so was divorce. To cancel the marriage and get his daughter back, the father had to return the dowry or purchase price. But if a husband did not get back the dowry, the woman could not be free because the husband had purchased the exclusive right, similar to the right of property, to use the woman as a wife. Upon divorce, a divorced woman could also be claimed by her ex-husband's heirs, just as she would be upon his death. While Islamic law forbade remarriage to a woman who was divorced in pregnancy, in pre-Islamic Arabia, a pregnant divorced woman could be taken by another man under agreement with her former husband.

Inheritance in the age of ignorance:-

Women were usually excluded from inheriting from their families. The reason for this inequity again has to do with the tribal structure of the society where the strength of each tribe depended on the ability of its members to participate in war. This resulted in inheritance being based on the principle of "comradeship in arms:" since men were physically stronger and better fighters, it led to the exclusion from inheritance of women, minors of both sexes and invalids as well as in the preference of the paternal to the maternal lines.

If a woman did have the right of inheritance, it was usually among the tribes where there were still traces of an ancient matriarchal culture which dictated that the woman remain with her tribe after marriage. In this case, whatever she inherited would stay within the tribe and pass on to her children who belonged to her kin. In other types of marriage where the woman left her tribe, her rights of inheritance were reduced as much as possible, since her inheritance would fall in the hands of another tribe.

Economic Condition of Women:-

During the days of ignorance, the economic condition of rural Arabs was not prosperous as the land of Arabia was barren, having no agricultural and mineral products. Hence, the people in general were economically depressed. They earned their livelihood by tending cattle. On the other hand, people of a higher status earned their livelihood by trading. At that time, Mecca was the commercial centre of foreign trade. Besides, every year a commercial fair was held at Ukaz in Mecca. Abu Bakr, Uthman and Khadija were the prominent traders who carried on business to Syria and to other cities.

In the pre-Islamic Arab society, money lending based on the system of usury was also in vogue among the Jews. In many ways, some poor debtors who could not pay their money to the usurers eventually sold their wives and daughters to the money-lenders in fear of harsh ill-treatment and severe harassment. On the contrary, women were excluded from the inherited property. The inheritance system in pre-Islamic Arabia was based on the adult men who were capable of fighting and defending the tribe in warfare. In this regard, women and female children who were unable to fight in the war lost had no inheritance right. It was one of the most significant economic deprivations of women during the age of ignorance in Arabia. In addition, women had no share of the property of deceased husband and father. If a man died, his wealth and possession was transferred to his male relatives. It was also another vulnerable economic position of women as their survival depended on the support of men in the family. A part from this, fathers often sold their daughters into marriage for a bride price (mahr). In many customary arrangements, wives were treated as possessions and could be inherited, traded or divorced at will without any financial compensation. In a poor tribal family, daughters were often viewed as an economic liability, for fear of economic burden as well. While wealthy, urban business women like Khadija bint Khuwaylid were an exception, the vast majority of women in nomadic tribes and agrarian tribes were left economically destitute and completely dependent on male relatives.

The economic situation of women before Islam:-

Historical sources, along with the many deprivations that women had before Islam, reported two financial exclusions; deprivation of inheritance, which is one of the most significant economic deprivations of women in that period. The general rule in the legacy of the pre-Islamic people was that only the men who were tribal fighters were inherited, and women and children were deprived of

inheritance. Women's worship was commonplace in most areas of the Arabian Peninsula, and in some areas some women benefited. Such a right is observed (563: 5). It was said that Ya'ali was deprived of this right because of the lack of women in the war and the lack of economic benefits to the tribe, as the man who inherited it in women's ignorance for the tribe of Amr ibn Jaysam ibn Ghanam.

What is certain is that it is impossible to deny the principle of female ownership in ignorance. Some in the verse 19 of Sura Nisaa, "It is not lawful for you to inherit from women." They said that in the pre-Islamic era, men who were married to the greed of taking possession of women's property, and, without respecting their rights and marital relationship, looked at him to die and own property. This is a sign of the title of the woman's property. There are other reports of women's business in ignorance, which is one of Khadijah's most famous (280: 9). Employment and gaining women in ignorance cannot be considered universal. In that community, like other human societies, men were the first to be in the economic arena because of their physical and mental characteristics. In addition, historical evidence also confirms this. In a justification for the exclusion of women from inheritance, the people of Yahyli considered one of the reasons why women were not earning and not earning income.

At the same time, there are reports of all kinds of women's occupations. Before expressing income-generating jobs, we find women's work at home. Pre-Islamic women, like other communities, were in charge of house affairs. Home businesses were responsible for baking bread, cleaning, sewing, tiling, and raising children. (616: 5). Other things like livestock, milking, water supply and the gathering of firewood were contributing to others. There are reports available from outside the women's employment area in Jahilite. Trade is one of the jobs that some women did in jahilite. The most famous of them is Khadijah, the wife of the Prophet (pub). (280: 9) Among the other women who came from Mecca's tradesmen is a woman named Um Shayba, daughter of Abatllah. Some women were also engaged in the sale. A woman named Hula, Tweed girl, has been reported in historical sources. She sold perfume in Mecca for the first time. Before the war, the warriors smelled their perfume. It became so commonplace that it became a proverb and when they used to use perfume, they were ready to battle. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) during the migration went to the tent named "Temple of Khazaieh", which sold food. The Prophet asked for him meat and date. The ability and nursing of other women's occupations were ignorant women in some industries. A woman named Rheinane was shotgun. His spear was made famous for his quality. Some of these women came to the Prophet (PBUH) after Islam, asking for their job orders. It was a nursery and beauty that the women had in their presence. The most famous of these women was Jahili, Khansa Bint Amr.

Other commonplace jobs at that time were lactation and custody of children. There were many women who were responsible for the care, care and nursing of children. People also brought their children to Bedouins for the sake of climbing high qualities, especially eloquence, rhetoric and warlords. The most famous of them was Halima Sadiya, who was responsible for the livelihood of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (15: 1). The women's sexual harassment is a pitiful act of women. (561: 5). Somehow, their ancestors forced themselves to commit adultery for the sake of economic gain, and put their ancestors in the hands of others, and instead they pocketed money. Verse 33 of Surah Nour "Do not force your money carriers to sell you to unsustainable life of the world, especially if they want to stay clean." In the

boycott, this was revealed. Of course, this kind of gain was not specific to the carnivores, but during the famine and poverty of some husbands, they gave their wives a handful.

Egyptian women had the right to own property and could inherit it. The cause of women's dignity in Egypt was domination of the mother's system. The woman in Mesopotamia had the right to use her property and could have bought and sold it and inherited her own (98: 6).

Conclusion:

In pre-Islamic period The man was the owner of the family. He had the right to line with women and children, while the woman was not considered in the line of other human beings. They were considered as the second class human being in pre-Islamic Arabia. Apart from these Arabs regarded women as a commodity if they did not have a son. After the husband's death, women were deprived of deceased husband's wealth. Besides women had no rights in the Social activities. The ordinary women generally did not have the right to own or inherit property under the dominant Tribal laws of pre Islamic Arabia. Rather wealthy and high-status upper clan women Some time enjoyed greater economic independence and ran profitable business.

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