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## A STUDY ON THE REPORTING OF INDIAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S PROBLEMS IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

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### ABSTRACT

Today, literally hundreds of magazines, journals, newspapers, television channels, FM radio channels and new media deliver various kinds of information, about current affairs and events all around the world. These deal not simply with religion, but with social and political issues as well. These mass media publications have played a crucial role in promoting social and political awareness in the society and in getting people's views and concerns across to the community, and to the state authorities, and in promoting closer interaction between nations. Apart from various social issues in the society, less importance is given to the news about women's community. The challenge before the media is to move beyond clubbing what happens to women, with routine crime briefs, on the one hand, and sensational stories, on the other. And different women's issues related to women and religion are not given much consequence; generally violence against women and sexual crimes are exaggerated to make interesting stories to attract commercially. Muslims in India are provided a separate civil code, and the Indian Constitution as well as administration recognizes the importance that should be given to the religion termed 'minority'. Still, the feeling among Indian women in general and Muslim women in particular is that in matters such as multi-marriages allowed to Muslim men (it is illegal if the Hindu men do the same), the irregularities in the 'divorce' formalities and the injustice committed towards Muslim women by their husbands and families are not given proper consideration by the Indian mainstream media. Therefore, two renowned Indian newspapers 'The Hindu and 'The Times of India' are taken and contextually analyzed regarding mass media reporting of Indian Muslim Women's Issues.

**Keywords:** Ceremony, Dominant, Religion, Muslim, Marriage, Nikahnama, Talaq, Women.

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## Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the reporting of Muslim women's problems in the Indian mainstream media. The study aims to turn the attention of the Indian media towards the lesser representation given to the Muslim women in the mainstream media.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years there have been many attempts across the globe to engage the media in a serious, sustained way to tackle the worldwide plague of Women's issues. Premised on the rationale that men and women while sharing similar circumstances of persecution may have differing perceptions of displacement, which is a depiction of feminine spaces through the eyes of women.

Nowadays, everyone is concerned about the rights of women in India. All women in India struggle daily against discrimination and inequalities - those that are written into the law and those that are followed as a part of society's rituals. They also encounter, despite laws designed to protect them, violence at the hands of the very people assigned the task of looking after their interests - the police, the security forces and their husbands, fathers, brothers. The style in which such crimes are reported render them so ordinary, unexciting and predictable- a feature of daily life that barely enter readers' consciousness, let alone impinge on their conscience. The other is the implicit triviality of the issues, conveyed by the haphazard, careless manner in which they are generally reported.

### 1.1. Need for the Study

The coverage of women's issues from within the media became increasingly dependent on the individual commitment of the few journalists still willing to risk professional exploitation in order to call public attention to issues of special concern to women, which they considered important for society. The problem was exacerbated by the media's seeming inability to distinguish between the different perspectives and arguments of the various groups involved in separate streams of protest. This study analyses the contexts of significant Muslim women's issues and clarify its position, and differentiate it from the mixed crew of demonstrators.

## 2. MEDIA AND ITS CONTEXT

### 2.1. Islamic Religion in Media

The word 'Islam' means 'Peace', and also 'Submission to the will of God'. The Islamic religion and way of life is essentially one which provides total harmony and fulfilment to its followers, yet the media does not portray this image. In television, films, books, newspapers and magazines Islam is presented as being a backward and barbaric religion. These various forms of media misrepresent Islam in different ways, but overall achieve the same negative result - the creation of 'otherness', and from this a growing barrier of misunderstanding and hostility between Islam and other religions. (Besant, 1932)

The form of mass media, which reaches most people in India on a daily basis are newspaper and television. It therefore has the power to communicate with and influence people at all levels of society. The print media offer a source of information which readers often accept as being factual, and thus use as a basis to form their own knowledge of ideas. Mostly, in all the medium, the common stereotype is that of the violent religious fanatic. In current affairs, we are constantly offered the image of Muslims as savage terrorists, killing innocent people with no penitence (Patel, 1999). No insight is given as to why some Muslim organizations carry out acts of violence. What results from this is that the common people, the readers, would recognize and accept only the labels - and therefore with 'Islam' they immediately associate negative images. As can be seen, two extremes emerge, and with this the question arises of whether these are the only types of Muslims that are acceptable to the Indian mass media. One upholds the status while the other provides sensationalism, neither being a true reflection of the majority of Muslims. The Muslims are rarely depicted in the media; in vernacular media, less news appears even if it is a serious issue. Muslim women are given less importance compared with other religious women. But the Muslim women should really be connected with societal issues, keeping a sustained support system in place to connect with people of every kind. India needs each and every kind of person to keep its lifelines supple and surviving. The Muslim women-related issues from the two leading newspapers of India are analyzed contextually and investigated. The role of media depiction in issues regarding Muslim women is deeply analyzed.

## **2.2. Trends of Indian Mass Media**

The mass media tend to exacerbate the problem. It has a tendency, in recent days mass media bandwagon many issues into different perceptions. Those who shout most frequently and the loudest are given the maximum mileage; the quieter, more thoughtful voices of those presenting a different perspective are lost or drowned out. The public at large is given to believe that the issue is black and white without any shades of grey. The very manner in which the problem is presented prejudices it.

Similarly, it is obvious that the mass media today are on the whole more preoccupied and powerful. However, they continue to reflect at least some of the issues highlighted by the society. This is partly because the issues have been adopted by the government, international organizations and other policy-making, programme implementing bodies, and partly because they are considered important by some individuals within the media. Mass media as a part of the society should play the role of the watchdog of the society.

## **2.3. Women's Movement and Rights**

Women are seen as the spiritual and intellectual equals of men, though again this is not the image presented. Meanwhile, the women's movement had shifted focus and tends to changed pace. With many women and women's groups moving beyond the campaign mode into more sustained, lower-profile grassroots activism and/or research, integrating concerns about gender into other related areas such as health and education, shelter and livelihoods, sustainable

development and the environment, religious fundamentalism and communalism, they were no longer 'making news' in the way they were in the late periods.

Looking back over the past decade, the women's movement tends to make less news now than it did during the previous decade, when it was more obviously active in the public arena. However, it continues to have an impact on the media because it has catalyzed events and processes that do make news, it has generated knowledge and understanding that help shape editorial views, and it has however entered the consciousness and influenced the perceptions of at least two generations of media persons.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research Design and Methodology**

This study examined the contexts of the various news reports of Muslim women in India. Two leading English newspapers, *The Hindu* and *The Times of India* are taken for the textual analysis with parameters. The study is based on Muslim women's issues and examined the coverage given by a cross-section of newspapers with special concern to women's issues that had attracted media attention. The newspapers belonging to the decade 2001-10 were randomly chosen for the study. Mainly issues about marriage practices, problems, divorce, rights of Muslim women and empowerment of Muslim women community.

The methodology used was Textual analysis based on the following parameters

- What kinds of problems are taken?
- What was the actual situation? What is the source of reason for the story?
- In what perception the reporter has discussed the story?

### **4. INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1. Textual Analysis**

The study analyzed Muslim women's issues and examined the coverage given by a cross-section of newspapers 'The Hindu' and 'Times of India' with similar issues of special concern to women by using the parameters.

##### **4.1.1. Reporting of Issues of Divorce and Personal Laws against Muslim Women**

The problem of divorce and a set of marriage law against women's rights created an issue in the society, this issue has been highlighted by women's movement to society through media to find solution for their problems. Then the media investigated the situation of other Muslim divorced women. The All-India Muslim Women's Personal Law Board tied with the mainstream media to precise the code and rights so that Muslim women would not have to struggle for maintenance. And other autonomous women's groups tied themselves into knots as they tried to work out to support a more equal set of personal laws.

Table-1. Textual analysis of reporting of issues of divorce and personal laws against Muslim women

Factors	The Hindu	Times of India(TOI)
What kinds of problems are taken?	The model <i>nikahnama</i> (a set of marriage law) which is against muslim women's rights and freedom, a burning issue for muslim women. (The Hindu 15 May 2005)	Muslim women community reject the model <i>nikahnama</i> (a set of marriage law) which is discriminatory, regressive and anti-women. (The Times of India 6 May 2005)
What was the actual situation?	The actual impulse is revealed by investigating the true stories which was highlighted by the women's movement, The All-India Muslim Women's Personal Law Board "bereft of Muslim women's rights prepare its own code of marriage." The model 'nikahnama' is bereft of the rights of Muslim women and does not clearly define 'talaq' in the light of the Shariat [Islamic jurisprudence]	Members of various Muslim women organisations, supported by others, jointly rejected the model 'nikahnama' adopted by the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB)  "The nikahnama was in the offing for a long time and this did not protect the rights of women.
What is the source of reason for the story?	The divorce for women-that is the practice of triple "talaq" -to annul a marriage with is detrimental to the overall interests of women who remain the "victims of the malady." The guidelines concerning 'talaq' in keeping with the Shariat.	The model nikahnama did not safeguard the interests of women. The male-dominated, and has no concern for women. The agitating women groups want the provision of right to divorce for women. (The Times of India 31 Jan 2006).
In what perception the reporter has discussed the story?	Nikahnama has failed to "redress the burning issues" confronting Muslim women in the country. The social point of view and broader national perspective by the Muslim women are positive outcomes.	Muslim women have decided to release a set of marriage laws, which they feel will safeguard their interests better. The fresh laws "shall have no gender bias and will keep an eye on women's interests and aspirations as well," said AIMWPLB chairperson. It will endeavour to protect the rights of Muslim women according to the Shariat laws and also to help them fight exploitation.

The issue was serious and affects the Muslim women community. It was also not surprising that the issues dovetailed with the news media's predilection for events, especially this involve or threaten aggressive or conflict. The media reports in The Hindu and Times of India about the 'nikahnama' is to mark their protest for Muslim women community. The Times of India collected the opinion of many Muslim organizations of Mumbai and revealed that the 'nikahnama' contained certain clauses that were against women and reflected a discriminatory attitude towards the female members of the community.

Whereas The Hindu gathered opinion from All-India Muslim Women's Personal Law Board that is it not only a conventional step undermining the rights of Muslim women but also proposes further separation of the community. The issues which received the most media attention were those that fitted into traditional, dominant perceptions of what constitutes news. Like, violence such as discrimination, regressive and anti- women with religious and legal overtones such as the controversies over Muslim women's right to maintenance after divorce.

These serious women's issues are not overtly violent or dramatic and, although they often involve large numbers, the affected persons are not necessarily part of a readily identifiable group or concentrated in a particular geographical area. Further, many aspects of women's oppression are so commonplace and widely accepted that they are not considered sufficiently extraordinary to merit coverage.

Generally these reports explicit the problem faced by Muslim women and how their personal laws are .Every religion had its personal laws which typically dealt with matters concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, succession, adoption and such other societal matters. And they argue that there is no gender discrimination in the Quran.

#### 4.1.2. Reporting on 'Talaq' of Muslim Women

The AIMPLB (All-India Muslim Women's Personal Law Board) had adopted a model 'nikahnama' which advocated the utterance of 'talaq' once instead of thrice when a Muslim male wanted a divorce from his wife. While the triple talaq meant a final separation, the single talaq signified a divorce which could be revoked. Triple talaq should be avoided, the board suggested. The AIMPLB suggested that the divorcee women should be considered if she has children, and law should protect the rights of women.

Table-2. Textual analysis of Reporting on 'talaq' of Muslim women

Factors	The Hindu	Times of India
What kinds of problems are taken?	The divorce for Muslim women is unjust, it is against women's right. Their main problems related to maintenance, suffering and distress on dissolution of marriage on account of triple 'talaq', polygamy for men, these problems were investigated by the media and taken as a serious issue. (The Hindu 05 March 2002)	The women rejected the model 'nikahnama' to mark their protest, that it contained certain clauses that were against women and reflected a discriminatory attitude towards the female members of the community.
What was the actual situation?	An aggressive discriminatory tone against women and despite several pleas for changing the personal laws which were amended for women's freedom and rights.	They rejected triple talaq and tends to changes in the divorce provision in muslim personal laws to find the justice and insist to prevalent the polygamy for men. According to the Hindu

		marriage act, 1955, which prohibits polygamy and extra-judicial divorce, the muslim personal law board was also urged to change the custom of marriage, Polygamy and extra-judicial divorce by muslims is a denial of equality, personal liberty and human rights. (The Times of India 7 Sep 2001).
What is the source of reason for the story?	The quarrel of Muslim women and other women's movement disputed the injustice and regressive, discriminatory acts against women.	The quarrel of Muslim women and other women's movement disputed the injustice and regressive, discriminatory acts against women.
In what perception the reporter has discussed the story?	The change has been slow and steady, probably inevitable, possibly regrettable but certainly thought provoking in society. The support and further empowerment of women with situation of Muslim women divorcees and their ability to receive maintenance, or indeed women divorcees from any other community.	The court paid attention to the new development of talaq and said it would put the lives of several muslim women in jeopardy.

The Hindu covered the story of shaheed Begum on March 4, 2002, she was divorced by her husband after ten years of marriage with two children and divorced with 'a triple talaq'. He gives only a pittance as maintenance for his children. She was one of the several Muslim women, who converged here from across the State, to demand an end to the "unjust talaq system" in the Islamic society. The future and prospects of children were the most important factors after the 'talaq' of Muslim women. Maximising the life chances of their children was so important to women that other concerns like aged parents or their own career prospects slipped into a secondary position when they thought about 'talaq'.

The practice of triple "talaq" to annul a marriage is discussed as being detrimental to the overall interests of women who remain the "victims of the malady." It is surprising that these issues merged with the news media's predilection for events, especially dramatic ones that involve or threaten violence or conflict. The issues which received the most media attention were those that fitted into traditional, dominant perceptions of what constitutes news: domestic violent such as divorce and other religious and legal overtones such as the controversies over Muslim women's right to maintenance after divorce.

*The Times of India* has brought the same kind of issues from many other parts of India, about several issues now women are facing across the country with their awareness of rights.

The AIMWPLB on July 1, 2005, together with the Muslim Women's Rights Network, (a coalition of 25 organizations formed in 2001 to challenge Muslim orthodoxy) joined to formulate a model code on Muslim marriages and divorce, frowning particularly on the "triple 'talaq'," the practice of granting summary divorce once a husband repeats 'talaq' three times. Though members of AIMWPLB, as well as many other women activists, feel the model code does not really safeguard the interests of women, it is hailed as step forward for women in the conservative Muslim society. This new boldness is reflected across India, which has 150 million Muslims. The Muslim women, even those from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, now actively try to change their cloistered lives, despite the fact that the literacy rate among Muslim women is barely above 50 percent.

#### **4.1.3. Reporting on the Empowerment and Adopting a Resolution for Marriage and Divorce**

*The Hindu* says (Jan 28, 2007), a Muslim woman in Mumbai- academician and activist in Mumbai -criticized the Sachar Committee report for overlooking the specific problems of Muslim women. Muslims for Secular Democracy and Communalism Combat discussed the implementation of the report, the panel emphasised that Muslim women's problems needed to be addressed specifically and separately. They noted that there was no woman on the Sachar Committee. There is implicit and explicit discrimination by both the government and the community against Muslim women." Apart from lagging far behind other communities in higher education, Muslim women were "invisible" as they were predominantly employed in the informal economy. There was a lack of accurate information on Muslim women and for this an Equal Opportunities Committee ought to be set up to directly address their concerns. There is a sweeping misunderstanding around the world regarding women rights and status in Islam because of misinterpretation of Quranic order regarding it by most of the Islamic clerics.

These manipulative and orthodox, have misconstrued ideologies regarding co-education, purdah system, marriage, talaq and women employment. Bathla (1998) 'Iqra' was the first word that was revealed in the holy Quran, meaning, to read. However, it is nowhere mentioned that only men should read and not women. The Quran emphasises that education of women is as important as of men. Times of India says, a fatwa was issued regarding no place for co-education in Islam. It does not hold much importance in India as there is no arrangement for separate higher education of women. Patel (1999) argues that the condition of women in the Muslim society is appalling as it is not keeping its women according to Islamic orders.



Table-3. Textual analysis of reporting on the empowerment of Muslim women

Factors	The Hindu	Times of India
What kinds of problems are taken?	No mention of women in the report; an Equal Opportunities Committee ought to be set up to address their concerns. The National Commission for Women (NCW) has convened a meeting of the State Wakf Board to discuss the problems of Muslim women, particularly those relating to divorce, maintenance and polygamy. <a href="#">(The Hindu 25 Nov 2004)</a>	The board discussed development of women and adopted a resolution dealing with marriage and divorce.
What was the actual situation?	Their main problems related to maintenance, suffering and distress on dissolution of marriage on account of triple `talaq', polygamy and difficulty in getting the `mehr' money on separation.	In a bid to provide educated Muslim women a platform to utilise their potential, the Iqra Foundation organised a three-day international meet in the city. Scholars from across the globe participated in the meet. The conference was also emphasised on the need for interfaith dialogues. Marriage and talaq in the Muslim community are the two aspects that have been much talked about and misinterpreted the most. <a href="#">(The Times of India 30 Oct 2008)</a>
What is the source of reason for the story?	"There are numerous complaints of women not receiving the maintenance allowance during and after the `iddat' period, difficulties in getting custody of their children and even their share in property, primarily due to illiteracy, poverty, ignorance and traditional beliefs," the NCW member, Nafisa Hussain, said. The State Wakf Boards had taken a number of initiatives for the socio-economic development of Muslim women, including financial assistance to the poor, widows, divorced women and destitutes.	Certain critics have stated that the AIMPLB has no right to take decisions on behalf of the entire Muslim community. The board was set up in the early 70s in the context of the demand for uniform civil code. It was set up primarily to protect Muslim personal laws within the framework of the shariat and at the same time usher in social reforms in the community.
In what perception the reporter has discussed the story?	The main objectives of the national consultation, was to bring to the fore the issues facing Muslim women and suggest remedial measures. The recommendations would be an important education tool for the State Wakf Boards to help Muslim women and enable the Commission to arrive at a decision for making recommendations to the Government.	The board has several achievements to its credit. These reforms have been widely endorsed by the Muslim community which underlines the acceptability of the board. And now they are working towards greater empowerment of Muslim women. <a href="#">(The Times of India 4 July 2004)</a>

As a result, coverage of women's issues from within these media became increasingly dependent on the individual commitment of the few journalists still willing to risk professional ghettoisation in order to call public attention to issues of special concern to women, which they considered important for society as a whole to be aware of.

Later there was development in the media bringing more issues about women and this is due to the growth of the contemporary women's movement in India, with women's groups becoming

steadily more active and vocal. The print and visual media, in turn, have responded to this greater volubility by giving women's issues more prominence.

#### **4.2. Telephonic Interview with Muslim Female Media Professionals Ms. Saira Banu**

Managing Director, Sphinx Media Private Ltd, Chennai says in the telephonic interview, "The value of education is being understood amongst Muslims, especially among Muslim women and now women are becoming professionals. This education along with media, gave knowledge and awareness in the society to fight for their rights," she said. "Looking back over the past, I saw that the women's movement tends to make less news now than it did during the previous days, when it was more obviously active in the public arena. However, it continues to have an impact on the media because it has catalysed events and processes that do make news, it has generated knowledge and understanding that help shape editorial views, and it has anyway entered the consciousness and influenced the perceptions of media persons." She added.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

Media's responsibility is to bring newsworthy items to the public, to raise awareness of issues and to inform the people what is happening locally or internationally. Reports on the coverage of Muslim women's issues regarding women's rights, in The Hindu and Times of India attract public attention, which they considered important for society as a whole to be aware of. It has helped to generate fairly widespread public awareness of at least the most obvious problems-discrimination in marriage and divorce issues faced by Indian women. It has also led to public recognition of at least some strategies to help women overcome these problems, especially the less complicated and contentious ones such as education, rights, freedom and credit and, to some extent, legal action. The autonomous women's organizations have widened their field, getting involved in anti-communalism and environmental issues. Women have started fighting for their human rights and started opposing state repression, and now they are beginning to intervene in mainstream politics, to get a foothold in decision-making bodies. These individual women and women in government have tied with media to take their problems to the society. As a result, coverage of women's issues from within these media became increasingly dependent on the individual commitment of the few journalists still willing to risk professional ghettoisation in order to call public attention to issues of special concern to women, which they considered important for society as a whole to be aware of.

The media has a great power, and how it chooses to exercise this power directly affects people. It is a propaganda machine of the highest order. The way in which this powerful organisation has treated and represented Muslim women could still improve for the betterment of the society.

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