

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF
THE SINDHI WOMAN (711 AD TO 1947)

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Equality among sexes is one of the most important watch words of this century. The United Nations during the past quarter of a century has used its legal authority and means of public relations to impress on the member states to improve the status of women. If we go through the annals of histories of various nations, we will find that the role of a woman is always a traditional one, trained from the very beginning in house-hold duties, living a secluded and sheltered life and closely restricted to homes, with no sharing of outside work with the man. Recent decades have witnessed profound socio-political and cultural changes the world over. Among the most revolutionary of these changes is the change in the status of women at all levels, social, political, legal, economic and educational.

Among the great religions of the world, Islam is the only one which has made serious and concerted efforts to place women at a respectable pedestal in society. This is amply testified by the fact that the Quran has devoted a complete chapter to women. Similarly in the books of Hadith, hundreds of them are devoted to descriptions of the significance of the woman's role, and the means and methods which should be adopted in giving her opportunity to make the best use of her character and ability.

The role and status of Sindhi women, before and after the introduction of Islam in this part of the world, can be studied through the images of women, which the popular media of the times has projected, and that is through the folk literature and the study of the history of Sindh. The writer of the history is the one who not only records the events but has to interpret the event to show its importance on human behaviour or socio-cultural conditions of the area.

Individual writers of the history of Sindh have selected different events, as having a greater importance than others. However, none of them has ignored the political involvement and socio-cultural levels of some very strong and pow-

erful women belonging to various dynasties, and the effects of their acts on the destiny of the rulers of the area.

Alongwith the political development of Sindhi woman, her cultural development or behavioural patterns, and how they have pervasively been shaped and constituted by certain influences all have their bases in shared group experiences. As such it involves an application of anthropological inquiry approach with implicit cross-cultural and comparative perspectives.

Charles Hughes the famous anthropologist advocates that the roots of cultural influence on the human being are very deep; indeed both to be a human being in general, and to belong to a specific human group in particular mean to be deeply shaped in action and thought by collective influences, we conceptualize as "Culture". He further adds that people are what their experiences makes them, that there is, in other words, something beyond biology and genetics that shape the character and behaviour of a person.(1)

This study is an investigation-cum-description of the socio-cultural and political development of the women characters in the history of Sindh from the period 711 AD to 1947, i.e. from the conquest of Sindh by the Arabs to the birth of Pakistan.

THE ARAB PERIOD (711 AD - 1025 AD)

Sindh was completely conquered and made a Muslim Province during the Umayyad Caliphate and the Arab rule over Sindh lasted till 1026 AD. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, in order to invade and conquer India, took Multan and Uch and sent his Wazir Abdur Razak to conquer Sindh and drive away the Arabs from the country. (2)

The Arabs due to the Socio-Cultural and moral changes that Islam has brought in their home land fully understood the role, status and the rights of women according to the teachings of Islam. The social and economic status of women was raised to such an extent that even the criminal women confined in jails were allowed about ten darhams a month as a stipend to buy and prepare their own food. The author of Jannat-e-Sindh documents an introduction of new kinds of

jewelry, cosmetics and fabrics that were introduced by the Arabs and used by Sindhi women. However, no woman was allowed to take a bath in public baths and engage in conversation with any man on the roads.⁽³⁾

In spite of all the socio-cultural reforms the Arab rulers could not save the Sindhi Hindu woman from burning herself alive with her dead husband, and becoming "Sati", a religious practice among the Hindus. As mentioned by A.A.Brohi, "The Muslim rulers did not exercise any pressure upon the population to accept Islam. The succeeding Arab governors also, realizing their numerical inferiority, not only maintained the policy of non-interference in the social and religious lives of the non-Muslims, but also permitted them to retain the administration of their personal law, religious institutions and control over local and communal affairs".⁽⁴⁾

Another social change that was introduced and wholeheartedly accepted by the Sindhi women in Arab period was introduction of female education in the conquered cities. The Muslim traditions required both men and women to be well-versed in Quranic knowledge and the rules of conduct dictated by the Holy Prophet. This led to the facilities provided to both Hindu and Muslim women to learn to read and write Arabic as well as the Hindi language.

Majority of the Arab soldiers and tribes that had come to Sindh were permitted and advised by the Suleman Bin Abdul Malik to settle down in the newly conquered cities. Some of these Muslims married the daughters of new Muslims. The beauty, faithfulness and intelligence of Sindhi women influenced the Arab families in such a way that they carried stories of the same back home. The Arabs introduced the system of polygamy in Sindh. Islam allows a man more wives than one, only under exceptional circumstances. At the same time it directs the man to do justice to all his wives. The introduction of polygamy in Sindhi culture later on became a sacred weapon in the hands of Feudal and selfish people, used for perpetuating discrimination and injustice against women.

The Sumra had already established their hold in the lower Sindh especially during the Khilafat of Abbasids. Not much is known from the history about their origin. In the History of Sindh, Mirza Kalich Beg makes a mention of a place called Samarah, and from the people of Samarah a vast tribe of Sumrahs spread throughout the country, many of whom held chieftainships of different places, for a period of over 200 years, paying tribute to the Muslim rulers of the country. It was only after the lieutenants of the kings of Ghazni and Ghor had passed away, that they seized the reins of the Government of the country and became independent.⁽⁵⁾ This was the period of promotion of ethical values and patriotism among the men and women of Sindh. Never before the equality of opportunity was provided to women and their status was raised socially as well as politically. It was during this period that many places were named after women such as Roopa Mari, Sonyani and others.

The participation of Sindhi women in political affairs is very well recorded in this period. A princess named Tari Bai took care of the administration of the province after the death of her father Dodo Sumro until her minor brother Singhar grew up to run the country. After his death in 1106 AD, his widow Homoo Bai ruled the country and established the fortress of Durak as capital city. After few years she was killed in a War with a rebellion Sumrah chieftain.⁽⁶⁾

It was during Sumrah period that the desirable qualities among the women were preached through folk tales and songs and the characters, especially the female characters were depicted as full of patriotism, loyalty to the kinship, honesty, decency in matters of behaviour, and economic and social consciousness. The Hindu woman used to take part in a lot of outside family functions and ceremonies - especially in temple dramas. This vast exposure to outside world and literature paved the way for her advancement in education and social activities, whereas, the Sindhi Muslim women of aristocratic families became subjected to seclusion and started losing the social contacts with the outside world, especially in the later period of Sumra dynasty. One of the cultural traditions of Sumras which affected Sindhi women's social and

economical status was the importance of kinship. If a man had a wife from another ethnic group or non-Sumra family, that wife and her children were considered to be inferior in comparison to the one having pure Sumrah blood and family line. These socio-cultural values resulted in the death of Dodo Sumro (the great warrior of Sindh) at the hands of the generals of Allauddin Khilji, the ruler of Delhi.

Historians write of Baghal Bai, a sister of Dodo Sumrah and how Chanesar, the elder brother of Dodo from a non-Sumra mother was denied the throne because it was feared by the Sumrah chieftains that being a weak person, who could not make decisions on his own, he will rule the country through the assistance and directions of his mother and they could not accept the influence of a non-Sumrah woman. They made Dodo the Chief of the tribe and Chanesar invited Allauddin Khilji to attack Sindh, and dethrone Dodo and in return he will get Baghal Bai, the accounts of whose beauty and wisdom had already reached Delhi.

The great poet of Sindh, Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai had dedicated four of his Surs or works of poetry to four folk stories of this period and have named them after the women characters of the tales (Moomal Rano, Saasi Punoo, Umar Marvi, Leela Chanesar) these poems depict the socio-political and economical status of women folk as envisioned by the common man.

THE SAMMA PERIOD 1351 AT - 1519 AD

Various historians have provided different theories about the origin of this tribe. Mirza Kalich Beg has written about Summas as the original residents who took possession of the country and raised their head man and chief, Unar to the throne with the title of Jam. (7) Mir Ali Sher Qaani advocate the theory of some historians who look upon Sammas as the descendents of Sam bin Nooh, and followers of Hinduism. They, like many other non-Muslim tribes of Sindh, had embraced Islam at the hands of Mohammad Bin Qasim. (8) The only mention of women folk in the history of Sindh during this period is of Noori, a beautiful girl from the fishermen "Gandra" tribe of the Keenjhar lake near Thatta. A Sam-

ma ruler Jam Tamachi who had fallen in love with her married her and built a palace for her on the banks of the lake.

The political power was exercised by a women who happened to be the mother of Jam Feroz the last ruler of Sama dynasty. Her name, as quoted by Mir Ali Sher Qaani from Tarikh Tahiri, was Madina Machani. She tried to reduce the influence of Darya Khan, the trustee of her son to such an extent that she invited Shah Beg Arghun to invade Sindh. This resulted in a fierce battle at Thatta in which the brave Sindhi general Darya Khan was killed, and Sammas lost their kingdom for ever.(9)

ARGHUN, TURKHAN AND MOGHAL PERIOD 1520 AD TO 1661 AD

During Turkhan period, a Moghal Princess named Mah Begum has been frequently mentioned in history. She was a niece of Mirza Shah Beg and was married to his son Mirza Shah Hassan. After his death, she got married to Mirza Issa Turkhan.

After the death of Mirza Issa Turkhan, she was taken as prisoner by his son Mirza Baki. Mah Begum had recommended Mirza Mohammad Baki as the successor and Mirza Issa had rejected her proposal saying that Mirza Baki was a cruel person and will oppress the people. It was due to the planning of this lady that Mirza Baki became the ruler and got seated on his father's throne. However, after some time when she witnessed the cruelty of Mirza Baki, she joined his brother Jan Baba and waged a war against him. Their forces were defeated and she became a prisoner of Mirza Baki and died in prison cell because of hunger and grief. (10)

From this period onward, it became very hard for Sindhi women to retain much of their original cultural identity. Constant cultural contact with the Moghal women, the influence and hold of outsiders and their cultural patterns as observed and documented by historians gave way to patterns of socialization and acculturation of Sindhi women. Many new developments were witnessed arising from the impact of foreign cultures, especially from the Moghal culture, whose cultural influences continued to manifest themselves throughout the Sindhi womens' family and outside family

activities. For example, the Sindhi women learnt more about the persian and Arabic scholars and poets, Persian language, and Mughlai dishes. Dresses and jewelry such as Peshwaz, Abaa, Doshala, Payama Jhoomar, Gulooband, Bazooband and various other new names and items become common among the political and economic elite families of Sindh.

However, the rural Sindhi woman did not get much exposed to the culture brought in by the outsiders. No matter whatever happened at political level, she kept on working in the same old way and through the same methods. Her only concern through out centuries has been the provision of the necessities of life to her family members, and we can claim that, if we want to know the un-touched, un-changed Sindhi woman, we can still find them in the isolated rural areas of Sindh or some times through the cultural revitalization movements which often are looked upon as reactions to situations, when groups of people express hostility and opposition to their ideologies, and some time make attempts, to create a new cultural out of the wreckage of the past.

KALHORA PERIOD 1557 AD TO 1783

The Kalhoras claim to be descendents of Abbasids. The first person, whose name appears in history, was Adam Kalhora who was gaining power as a religious leader in Multan. He was executed in 1558. In 1701 Shikarpur and the adjoining areas were handed over to Mian Yar Mohammad by Aurangzeb. By 1768 Kalhoras ruled the eastern banks of Sindh and Mian Ghulam Shah founded the present city of Hyderabad. In 1783 Kalhoras were defeated by the Talpurs and thus their rule ended in Sindh.

Not much change in the socio-cultural patterns of Sindhi women is recorded in the history of Sindh except that to show their family and economic status they used to purchase black and persian slave girls for their house-hold. Mian Ghulam Shah Kalhora was very much under the influence of spiritual leaders. Thatta was still the spiritual centre of the country. The great theologians of the Naqshbandi order in Thatta had translated the fundamentals of Islam into their mother tongue, and there were emotional Sufi poets like

Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit.(11)

It was due to the influence of the teachings of religious scholars of Thatta and their cultural sanctions that Mian Noor Mohammad imposed restrictions on the outside home social activities of Sindhi Muslim women, as compared to the Hindu women, who were free to attend mixed ceremonies and interact with the male members freely.

It was Mian Noor Muhammad Kallhoro who, upon learning that Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai had been enjoying some of his poems sung by a beautiful woman Gulan, looked upon it as non-Islamic practice and ordered to arrest, and bring her to the court to be punished. When she was presented before him he got so much influenced by her innocence and beauty that he married her. Her son Mian Ghulam Shah built the beautiful tomb on the grave of Shah Abdul Latif at Bhit Shah.

To understand the socio-cultural status and development of Sindhi woman in this period, we have to refer to the greatest work of literature of the times, i.e. Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. All the female characters, their aspirations, patterns of socio-cultural sanctions and impositions, attributed role in society, political status, class stratifications, all are recorded and depicted through these characters. As far as, economic status of Sindhi women is concerned Shah described on one hand the activities of the women from "Maroo" tribe as gatherers and farmers, cattle herders and cotton spinners, but very much loyal to their customs and values. On the other hand, he brings women like Leela and Moomal before us, enjoying all the luxuries of the world but still trying to get more and more of their positions.

THE TALPUR PERIOD 1783 - 1843

The Talpurs of Sindh commonly known as Mirs are descendants of Shahdad Khan Baloch who served Mian Yar Mohammad Kalhora as a Counsellor and looked upon him as his spiritual guide. The Talpurs acquired a lot of influence in the affairs of States and later on developed enmity with the last Kalhora ruler, Mian Abdul Nabi, who instead of acknowledging the bravery, loyalty and glorious record of ser-

vices of the Talpur Balochs turned against them. This enmity surfaced when Mian Sarfraz Khan got involved in the conspiracy of the murder of Mir Bahram Khan and his son Mir Subedar Khan. After some time Mir Bajar Khan, the second son of Mir Bahram Khan was also killed by the treasonous character of Mian Abdul Nabi Khan, although the Talpur Generals of Sindh had been facing all the outside invaders and saving the Kalhora dynasty. In 1783, a war was fought between Talpurs and Kalhoras. The Talpurs under the generalship of Mir Fateh Ali Khan emerged as winners and became the rulers of Sindh. Their rule lasted till 1843 AD. The last Talpur ruler Mir Nasir Khan and his companions were defeated by the British General Charles Napier, who later on was put in political charge of Sindh as a Governor.

The socio-cultural status and behavioural patterns of lower middle class Sindhi women did not change much during this period. However, women belonging to middle and upper class who were already influenced by Moghal traditions were much facilitated by the love and appreciation for education and literature demonstrated by the Talpur rulers. Not only the women and girls of royal family but even from the middle class used to learn Persian, Sindhi and the Holy Quran. Girls upto ten years of age were allowed to go to the houses of their female teachers and get their lessons. At the same age they were taught how to cook, sew and take care of other house-hold chores. Muslim families would not allow their girls to learn to sing or dance. However, the Hindu girls were encouraged to do so.

Talpur rulers purchased a lot of African slaves and entrusted them various duties at court and inside the female quarters. These slave men and women even after freedom used to stay with their masters. These Africans were expert dancers and singers and no ceremony would be considered completed without their dances and songs.

The social and family status of woman was always judged from the dress she used to wear and the number of female servants that used to stand behind her. Silken dresses with pure gold thread embroidery was the main costume of royal women; whereas middle class women would use many

varieties of cotton dresses or hand-made silken outfits.

For the first time in the history of Sindh we have been able to find evidence of Sindhi women's commitment to literary activities. Dr. Qamar Mirza while doing her research on the cultural and educational services of Talpur rulers had found that Mir Bajar Khan's wife used to maintain her own library and that many books belonging to her library are available among the descendents of Talpur families. These books were written on the instructions of the same Bibi. For example Ziyafaatullah the writer of "Musnavi Saiful Malok and Badiul Jamal" has noted on the last page of the book that Mir Bajar's wife had asked me to write this book. Bibi Sona, the daughter of Mir Naseer Khan gave a proof of her love and interest for literature by purchasing very expensive masterpieces of poems, fiction and history. Bibi Nek Akhter Mir Noor Mohammad Khan's wife also maintained her own library and patronised good and efficient writers. A number of manuscripts of the Quran and of classical persian and Sindhi books written for her are still preserved with the Talpur family. (12)

THE BRITISH PERIOD 1843 AD TO 1947 AD

In the course of Sindhi women's history the British conquest of Sindh in 1843 and of India in 1857 occurred as an event which finally changed their culture and social characteristics and provided them with all the opportunities to show vital signs of their political development and distinctive ethnic and cultural identity.

The Britishers needed an educated class who could serve them in administrative jobs therefore they started establishing primary and secondary schools in the provinces. By the end of 1852 about 800 girls were enrolled in these schools. The first English School for girls and boys started working in 1847 at Karachi, and the children of Muslim and Hindu aristocracy were enrolled in that school. In comparison to the Muslims, the Hindus had just to change the masters and applied considerable talents in obedience they had developed over hundreds of years in obeying the British, and taking advantage of the new educational and social system to join the

sub-ordinate services in the British administration. Seventy five percent of Sindhi Muslims were farmers and skilled labourers and they did not realize the importance of education for their profession. Whereas, the Purdah system in Muslim families also served as a hinderance for female education.

When the official Sindhi alphabet was introduced by Sir Bartle Frere, the problem of female education was to form one of the first subjects of the publications which were printed in the presses of Bombay, Karachi and other places. Divan Korumal was the first to write, in 1869, about the advantages of female education, lateron Sadhu Hiranand Adwani founded the newspaper Sindh Sudhar (1884) then the Sarswati Akhbar to which in 1890 a womens' magazine (in Gurmukhi script) was added. It dealt with the household problems. Education of children and other relevant questions.⁽¹³⁾ By 1910, the Sindhi women became much inclined to get education in professions like teaching and medicine which were approved for them through the social and cultural norms of the society. However, there were very few opportunities available to them. The countess of Duffen and Mir Ghulam Mohammad Talpur of Tango Bago in 1931 AD established Medical Training Institutes for girls.

The most important social development of the times was the establishment of "Widwa Ashram" (Widows' house) in 1911 AD by Diwan Gidumal at Hyderabad, Sindh. This changed the life pattern and status of Hindu Widows, who, according to the tradition, could not get married again and had to keep a low profile and inactive life in seclusion. By living in the Widhwa Ashram, they learnt various methods of earning their livelihood and thus became contributing members to the society. Mirza Qalich Beg, the famous Sindhi writer was one of the leading characters in narrating to Sindhi women the heroic deeds of women in history. He also wrote the Novel Zeenat (1918) which was devoted to the education of women so that they play an active role for the welfare of their family and society.

The first Sindhi novel written by a woman was published in 1930 and another one in 1940 by Begum Badam Natawan Khatoon. Her mother Sara Begum Mughal, afte getting

primary education in 1930, had herself become a teacher, and was a source of inspiration in imparting education to all her daughters and grand daughters. There were four other Sindhi women writers namely: Mai Zeenat, Ghulam Zehra, Bibi Meemoo, and Mai Khatoo. All of them wrote about the importance of female education, morality and social reforms.

In 1932, the first Sindhi female Medical Doctor received her degree and started practicing medicine. Her name was Dr.Sarah Siddiqui and she was from Shikarpur.

From 1930s onward, the educated Sindhi women themselves started the campaign to help their other underprivileged sisters in getting education, in learning important vocations, and in understanding the socio-political situation and their role as an agent of change in the society. The most prominent among them were, educationists such as Begum Roshan Moghal, Begum Aisha Shaikh, Begum Shams Abbasi, Mrs.Leela Herchandani, and socio-political workers and leaders such as Jethi Sipahimali, Begum Nusrat Abdullah Haroon, Begum Khadija Daudpota, Begum G.Allana, Miss Fatima Jinnah, Begum Tahira Agha, Begum Syed Miran Mohammad Shah, Dr.Hameeda Khuhro, Begum Aziz Rasool, Begum Abdul Aziz, Begum Sughra Hidayatullah, Begum Ansari, Begum M.Ishaque, Begum Wali Mohammad, Begum Shaaban, Begum Majeeda Bhurgri, Miss Hassan Ali Effendi and hundreds and thousand of unknown workers.(14)

On the one hand, majority of our educated women were busy in bringing about a new order in the society and to prove that the Sindhi woman had reached the new stage in their socio-cultural and political development; on the other hand from 1911 to 1944 in Sanghar District of Sindh, uneducated, hardworking, tradition-ridden Hur women, (followers of Pir Pagara Shah Sabghatullah Shah Thani (present Pir Sahib Pagaras' martyred father) were busy in waging a war against the British Government, because the Britishers had developed an image of Pir Saheb as a freedom fighter and they wanted to kill him in one way or other, to make an example of him. The Britishers not only arrested the leader of Hurs but bombarded his residence, arrested thousands of his followers, imposed Martial Law in Sanghar and declared the

whole community of Hurs as robbers and killers. At that time the un-educated Hur woman, who had always kept a low profile, and lived a protected life, came out of her home and performed all the duties that a soldier has to perform in warfare. Even today if we go to Sanghar, Shahdadpur, Pithoro and Tando Adam, people will tell us the true stories of the bravery of Mai Sahbaan Khaskhelly, Badili Nizamani, Dhanoo Nizamani, Jannat Halepota, Bachoo Badshah's wife and the wife of Rahim Hingoro. These were ladies who always wore men's dress during the whole movement and were very brave women and skilled shooters.

We may conclude from the above study of the socio-cultural and political development of Sindhi women from the period 711 AD to 1947 AD that change has been a constant element in Sindhi culture. However, majority of our historians and sociologists haven't been able to identify the process of change, the result being that we the people of the province and especially the women folk and those incharge of this underprivileged group of society did not gear that change to progressive and sequential development of conditions that would have facilitated the promotion of a woman's independent judgement, and intelligent perception of the difference between right and wrong that would liberate herself entirely of her own will from the wrong and repressive thinking of the influential in the society and the customs, that are contrary to the spirit of Islam and of human dignity. We now have historical evidence before us, that those women who did so emerge victorious, and were able to bring healthy change, in their lives and in the lives of others around them and reached the highest levels of socio-cultural and political development.

END NOTES

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