

# WOMEN AND ISLĀM AS RELIGION IN A NOMADIC SOCIETY

(A Case Study of Cholistan, Pakistan)

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**Abstract:** Islām as religion endows its follower with comprehensive code of life encompasses all human life aspects. Islām enriches its believers with beliefs explaining cause, nature and purpose of the universe and code of life. Muslim women also abide to practice Islāmic doctrine within her gender specification. Women relation with Islām is not identical in all Islāmic societies rather influenced by multifarious components. Cholistan: second largest desert of Pakistan with nomadic and semi nomadic living style have Islām as dominant religion since centuries. Life in deprivation of elemental amenities in nomadic living of Cholistan gives Islāmic practices limited space in social life. Islām adopts diverse shape in appreciation of desert life and women role and status in range. Current study intended to reveal women's perceptions, practices about Islām and their sources of religious learning and gratification as Muslim in Cholistan. Thus it explored nature and depth of women's affiliation with Islām that how identity as Muslim became their pride, with little understanding and practices of Islāmic teachings. Therefore it includes the paramount status of *peer* (spiritual healer), sacred places and celebrations which emerged as Islām for them. Islām of women of Cholistan actually has little to do with their social life.

Keywords: Islām, Cholistan, Women, Religious knowledge, Sacred.

Religion is one of the oldest social institutions<sup>1</sup> Islām is one of the prominent divine religion among foremost religions. A religion includes an institutionalized system of beliefs<sup>2</sup>, it answers sacred questions<sup>3</sup> and comfort sense of some greater purpose of life<sup>4</sup>. An attempt to comprehend religious perspective of women in Cholistan cannot be accomplished without

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consideration of geographical conditions under which they are living. Majority of the people living in Cholistan are Muslims as being part of Pakistan where more than 96% of population is Muslim. Cholistan is hottest desert of Pakistan<sup>5</sup> with 50°C and above temperature in the summer season<sup>6</sup>. Cholistan locally known as *Rohi*, is situated 30 kilometres away from Bahawalpur city and extends into Thar desert in its east and borders with the Bikaner and Jaisalmer districts of state of Rajasthan, India in south<sup>7</sup>. Its population is 0.155 million, latitudes is 27 42' and 29 North and longitudes 65 57' 30'' and 72 52' 30''<sup>8</sup>. Based on geographical features, Cholistan area is divided into two parts<sup>9</sup>. Its southern and major part is called Greater Cholistan which comprises 70% of the total Cholistan area and other part is called Lesser Cholistan consisting of 30% of the Cholistan<sup>10</sup>. Due to severe weather and geographical conditions, Greater part of Cholistan is also called as *Marusthali* (The valley of death)<sup>11</sup>. Greater part is mostly consisting of Muslim population, whereas in the lesser Cholistan, Hindu population is also found in the vicinity of irrigated and settled areas. In the Cholistan, Islām and Hinduism are two religions but Muslims are overwhelming majority and Hindus are living as minority. Cholistan area was introduced with Islām as early as 712 A.D when the Muslim armies conquered this area under leadership of Arab commander Muhammad Bin Qasim who defeated Raja Dahir<sup>12</sup>.

Islām accomplish believes with eternal truths, furnishes realities of universe associated with Allah in evident aspects. Islām revealed truth about human creation in contacts of their role and about afterwards life<sup>13</sup>. Islām as complete code of life bears complete set of belief and practices to its followers. As Holy Qur'ān clearly and authentically states:

وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ تَبْيَانًا لِّكُلِّ شَيْءٍ<sup>14</sup>

Holy Qur'ān "We have revealed to you the book which clarifies every matter"

Therefore, even fundamental pillars of Islām have philosophical canon as monotheism in Allah, believe in angels, in his conveyed revelation, in after death eternal life and in Allah's authority over destiny and perfect judgement<sup>15</sup>. That is way value system of Islām has an expanded role in Pakistani society<sup>16</sup>. According to the Islāmic teachings, religious comprehension and practice is equally essential for both men and women. It come ashore from parents, culture, elder kith and kin, through syllabi and

continues through religious teachers, mosques and *Madrassas* seminaries. Mosques, *Adhan* (call to five times prayers), Friday's sermons, *Eids* sermons shape social life of a Muslims. Use of loudspeaker for such activities became source of women's understanding of the religion. Pervasiveness of the Islām can be understood from this report;

*In everyday social interaction, individuals are keen to lecture others on how to follow the religion and conform to the injunctions ordained by God, His prophets and religious authorities and leaders. Against this backdrop, one can imagine the extent of influence religion has on people's lives and behaviours<sup>17</sup>.*

Due to geographical conditions, Cholistan desert has uniqueness in all aspects of life and same is the case in practice of acclaimed adoption of Islām. However, here practice and understanding of Islām is not same like rest of the country owing to illiteracy, nomadic culture in the area.

Finding the gap in the literature, current study explored understanding and practices of Islām by women living in the Cholistan. It has also studied different sources of learning religion and the ways for satisfaction of religious feelings. For achieving the aforesaid objectives with focus on women in the Cholistan, an ethnographic research was undertaken. We adopted purposive sampling strategy and studied 50 elderly of 50 years and above through experience survey. There were two main reasons for selecting this age group of the respondents. First, they had social acceptance in close and nomadic society of Cholistan for speaking, second they were well versed in the local folk and could explain and interpret their understanding and practices of the religion. It was an overt study conducted with confidence of gate keepers. The data were collected through protracted qualitative interviews and participant's observation and analysed through content analysis method.

### Religious Identity and Women in Cholistan

According to the teachings of Islām, adherence to Islām is equally important for both men and women. Women have no gender base restriction for understanding and implementation of Islām. Rather Islām emphasises on acquisition of religious knowledge for all Muslim and made them responsible for their own deeds after assigning them the duty to follow Islām. Holy Prophet (ﷺ) declared it important that made gaining knowledge is responsibility of the entire Muslims irrespective of being men

or women, according to hadith:

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ<sup>18</sup>

“Acquisition of knowledge is binding on all Muslims (both men and women without any discrimination)”.

Allah make women responsible for her deed to attain reward after assigning them the duty to follow Islām, Allah propound in the Holy Qur’ān;

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيٰوةً طَيِّبَةً ۖ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ<sup>19</sup>

“To who-ever, male or female, does good deeds and has faith, We shall give a good life and reward them according to the best of their actions”. In the light of above quoted Qur’ānic verse, women of Cholistan as Muslim bear responsibility of understanding and practicing Islāmīc doctrine.

As discussed in the previous section, women in Cholistan Muslim because they born in a Muslim family. Their nativity determines Islām as their religion which they own with pride. It was observed that Muslim women in Cholistan strongly differentiate themselves from Non-Muslims (Hindus). There was a strong sense of affiliation and pride on the part of Muslim women; they distinguish themselves from the non-Muslims by stating that Hindus lives in Sindh (out of *Rohi*).

This is manifestation of their affiliation with Islām they were cognisant about Muslim-hood and were keen not to merge them with Hindus. Islām as religion constructs relation between human and Allah as monotheism is very basic concept of Islām as Allah describe. It was observed that strongly acclaimed Muslim women of Cholistan were not aware of basic Islāmīc teachings. At some places, respondents were unable to rightly recite first *Kalma* (declaration of Islām). Infact, being born in Muslim family made them acclaimed and proud Muslim when they were not familiar with the primary and fundamental teachings of Islām.

### Religious Knowledge and Women in Cholistan

Religious knowledge of women on Islām is very poor in the Cholistan. Besides, there was contraction in the claim and on ground practices of the Islāmīc set of prayers by the women in the Cholistan. As discussed earlier, Islām is complete code of life and it surrounds all the walks of human life rather than mere declaration and claims. Islām begins with and gives

guidance for the complete life of its followers; Contrary to this, Muslim women in Cholistan were not aware of even basic pillars of Islām. Most of them were aware of offering prayers, observing fasts and performing hajj but most of them were not even aware about Zakat as basic pillar of Islām. Likewise, most of the women who were aware of obligatory prayers were not aware about how to perform this obligation. They were aware of fasting and hajj as religious activity but most of them did not have knowledge about them as basics of Islām. It reflects that they were not aware about basic teachings and obligatory practices of Islām.

There are several reasons behind this unawareness about basics of the Islām in the Cholistan area. First, this area is lagging behind in religious education and awareness due to several reasons.

There are no sources of formal religious education like madrassa, religious seminaries, *Imam/molvi* and access to modern communication in the Cholistan. The problem becomes deeper because geographical conditions of the Cholistan prevent the outsider religious teachers to stay in Cholistan for imparting religious education and leading prayers. Lack of basic amenities of life, aloofness of the area from the rest of the country, poor transportation facilities and hard climatic conditions are the major factors for deprivation from religious education. In the absence of formal education and awareness through other sources such electronic and print media, there is poor awareness understanding religion in the Cholistan. Such geographical and economic condition limits educational opportunities for both men and women.

Although there is lots of importance given to religious learning in Islām as this Qur'ānic proclamation makes it crystal clear Allah state in Qur'ān

وَأَذِ يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ ط. <sup>20</sup>

"Allah will exalt in degree those of you who believe, and those who have been granted knowledge".

Similarly, Holy prophet (PBUH) was reported to say:

مَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ بِهِ خَيْرًا يُفَقِّهْهُ فِي الدِّينِ،، وَإِنَّمَا الْعِلْمُ بِالتَّعَلُّمِ <sup>21</sup>

"If Allah wants to do good to a person, He makes him comprehend the religion [the understanding of the Qur'an and As-unna (legal ways) of the Prophet (Muhammad (ﷺ)). As for formal religious education in the

Cholistan is concerned, there were few *Masjid Maktab* schools (mosque schools) in lesser Cholistan established by Cholistan Development Authority. It is important to mention that male children are sent to *madrassa* for religious education and religious training but female children are forbidden to go out of home/*toba* for religion education. This is reflection of parent's interest in their religious education of their children. In nomadic culture of the Cholistan, religious education of women is not priority but men are not against as think it as a source for making them pious and obedient to family and area traditions.

Sources for religious knowledge are mostly informal in Cholistan such as parents and other elderly of the family like grandparents who themselves are not well versed in religious knowledge. It was found that people living in Cholistan learnt religious practices by hearsay from people of settled areas. It happens when they occasionally visit settled areas and get an opportunity of observing settled people performing religious obligation like regular prayers and fasting to name.

Since, transfer of religious knowledge is informal in Cholistan; so it is not reliable knowledge about religious beliefs. A woman did not have any direct and viable source of learning about religion mainly due to geographical conditions and partially due to nomadic culture prevailing in the Cholistan. Her knowledge about religion is dependent on male's sharing in informal way. Although in Islām women has no gender based exception for learning Islām. Women shared that they follow their men for learning and performing religious obligatory practices.

As mentioned earlier, men themselves were not well versed about belief and practices of Islām but women perceived them as authority of religion. Women of Cholistan themselves believe that men were more aware about religion than them.

In phenomenological reality, women in Cholistan have very poor understanding and knowledge about religious belief and practices, particularly in greater Cholistan. People of lesser Cholistan get opportunity of interaction with people from outside the desert where there is better education and awareness about religion. They acquired some knowledge about religious practices through observation during their visit to the urban and suburban areas and through their interaction people from there. Nomadic culture in Cholistan discouraged mobility of women which limit

women learning of Islām, thus such interaction is also indirect learning from male. Therefore, women folk knew only few things about Islām and its beliefs.

### Basic Pillars of Islām and Women in Cholistan

Islām as religion makes it obligatory for its followers to believe in the core values known as *arkan e eman* which are *Shahada* (faith), *Salat* (prayer), *Zakāt* (charity), *Sawm* (fasting), *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). Hence, it is obligatory for the Muslims to practice basic pillars of Islām throughout their life. But in case of women in Cholistan, they were not even aware of aforementioned fundamental beliefs of the Islām. Teachings of the Islām give great emphasize on believing core values and practicing basic pillars, holy Prophet (ﷺ) said:

”شَهَادَةُ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَأَنَّ مُحَمَّدًا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ، وَإِقَامُ الصَّلَاةِ ، وَإِيتَاءُ الزَّكَاةِ ، وَصَوْمُ رَمَضَانَ ، وَتَعْطُوا الْخُمُسَ مِنَ الْمَغْنَمِ“<sup>22</sup>

" To testify that *La ilāha illallah wa anna Muhammad-ar-Rasūl Allah* (none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad : is the Messenger of Allah), *Iqamat-as-Salat* [to perform *As-Salat* (the compulsory - congregational prayers) perfectly, to pay *Zakat*, to observe *Saum* [fasts (during the month of Ramadan)], (and) to pay *Al- Khumus* (one-fifth of the booty to be given in Allah's Cause)".

Keeping in the view this hadith, women of Cholistan were rarely performing mandatory religious obligations. The concept of religious is limited to reciting holy Qur’ān and learning how to offer *salat* (regular congregational prayers). In the context of women in Cholistan, it is believed that holy Qur’ān is source of blessings and virtues, but they were very little known about its comprehension and implementation in the real life, as Allah said:

ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ<sup>23</sup>

“This is the book, in it is guidance for sure without doubt, to those who fear Allah”.

It was found that women of Cholistan were far behind in practicing core values of the Islām up to the level that many elderly women could not utter few words of the prayers. There were too few women offering prayers and observing fasting in the month of *Ramadan*, it was only exceptional in the

Cholistan.

Similarly, *Zakat* is all about a men's job in Cholistan, women did not know anything about one of the fundamental pillar of Islām. Although women in Cholistan had heavy jewellery, but it was not reported during the current study that someone had paid *Zakat*, even if it was applicable. It was found that some people of Cholistan perform *Hajj* which is responsibility of all people who have financial affordability for it. Interestingly, people who were not aware about basic pillars of Islām like congregational prayers and fasting in month of *Ramadan*, but were going to perform *Hajj* because it earns popularity and social status.

Women in Cholistan perceive that just like other social responsibilities, religion is also men's responsibility. That is why men were offering more prayers, observing fasts and performing *hajj* than women. Since people in Cholistan took religious practices as source of pride rather than faith, therefore women's religious practices in Cholistan is remarkably low. They openly made their male members responsible for religious practices and feel sort of satisfaction that their responsibility has also been fulfilled.

Few elderly women reported that they have performed *Hajj*, however number of women performing *Hajj* is remarkably less than men. Although performing *Hajj* is equally mandatory for both men and women. As Prophet (ﷺ) said:

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ أُمِّ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا أَنَّهَا قَالَتْ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، نَرَى الْجِهَادَ أَفْضَلَ الْعَمَلِ، قَالَ: «لَكِنَّ أَفْضَلَ الْجِهَادِ حَجٌّ مَبْرُورٌ»<sup>24</sup>

Narrated Aishah, the Mother of the faithful believers (R.A): I said, “O Allah's Messenger! We consider Jihad as the best deed. Should we not participate in Jihad” The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “The best Jihad (for women) is *Hajj-Mabrur*”.

In the Cholistan, performing *Hajj* is especially ascribed to men because it involves travelling and mobility which is rarely permitted to the women. When we explored for reasons behind less practice of Islāmic teachings by women, there were two main factors which contributed for it. First there is perception in Cholistan that religion is solely men's responsibility whereas women have to perform a number of domestic chores, such as fetching drinking water from *toba*, collecting wooden fuel for cooking and churning the milk. They women reported that their daily schedule is very hectic and



laborious leaving them with little time for performing religious obligations such as congregational prayers. It is important to report that geographical and weather conditions of Cholistan are not conducive for performing certain religious practices like fasting and offering prayers. Scorching heat in the area makes it hard to observe fasting, similarly scarcity of water and nomadic life style is hurdle in offering regular prayers, because it is nearly impossible to keep the clothes and body neat and clean which is a pre-condition for performing prayers.

### Islām in Social Life of Women in Cholistan

Generally, religion has very limited role in the social life of women in Cholistan, they were mostly blindly following male members of the family. According to Qur'ānic teachings, it is essential for Muslim to follow guidance of Islām in all aspects of their life. Islāmic teachings unambiguously propound for adoption of religion in all walks of life. Allah stated in the holy Qur'ān:

إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, this Qur'ān guides to that which is most just and gives good tidings to the believers who do righteous deeds that theirs will be a great reward”.

It was observed that there is little involvement of the religion in social life of women in Cholistan. They cover their head as cultural practice not a religious obligation. Women were not aware about guidelines given and assigned roles of Islām in their practical life. They were following and obeying their male member of the family that is why religious understanding was limited to social identity and few ambiguous beliefs. In the prevailing circumstances, culture was more dominant in the decision making process than the religion. Although Islām gives guidance for social life along with prayer:

حَدِيثَ النَّبِيِّ ﷺ فَقَالَ: يَا مَرْءَانَا بِالصَّلَاةِ وَالزَّكَاةِ وَالصَّلَةِ وَالْعَفَافِ<sup>26</sup>

“He (the Prophet ﷺ) ordered us to offer As-Salat (the prayers) to pay the Zakat to keep good relations with kith and kin, and to be chaste”.

The above quoted hadith reveals that Islām as religion sets pattern of social life along with offering prayers. But in the Cholistan, religion did not have such visible role. Important religious celebration of *Eid-ul- Azha* and *Eid-ul-Fitr* are more social celebration than religious; women of Cholistan celebrate

these religious events without understanding the spirit and philosophy of these celebrations. Most of the women did not observe fasting before celebration of *Eid-ul-Fitr*. *Eid ulAzha* was celebrated more as they can easily slaughter animals from their herds many of the women were unaware of cause of that celebration. They celebrate religious event just for the sake of celebration and a customary practice without understanding of their religious importance. Participation in *mela* (carnival) is thought to be very important religious celebration and gathering. The *mela* is annual entertainment along with satisfaction of religious sentiments. Women also participate in *mela* but it is subject to male permission and acknowledgement of need of visit. Mostly women went to shrine for making wishes or fulfilling vows mostly for children especially for baby boy.

### Desert Life Response to Religious Feelings

Having limited and unauthentic knowledge and exhibition of their strong affiliation with Islām, women in Cholistan perform different activities in the name of religion. Owing to poor knowledge on the part of women, several social practices have been perceived as a part of religion. As a whole, religion is confined to few concepts, customary practices and superstitions like visiting *peer*, shrines and some other places believed to be sacred. This practice has led to be blind submissiveness and obedience of *peer* and certain other objects associated to them such as their shrines and trees. Majority of women believed that supernatural creatures and signs of good and bad exist and could be beneficial and harmful in their life. Although Islāmic teachings sufficiently demonstrate about monotheism, as stated in Holy Qur'an:

يَقُومُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ إِحْسَانًا وَلَا يَدْرُسُوا إِلَهًا غَيْرَ اللَّهِ مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرُهُ ط إِنِّي أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمْ<sup>27</sup>

O my people! Worship Allah alone. You have none other than Him that has the right to be a deity to be worshiped”.

### Discussions and Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that there is little knowledge of the religion on the part of women living in the Cholistan. These findings are consistent with Din<sup>28</sup>, who argued that people in Cholistan should have been more religious like other deserts in the Middle East and Africa but we observed low inclinations and enthusiasm among the people in Cholistan towards religion as compared to other parts of the country. The significant

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factor contributing towards poor religious knowledge and its practice is hostile environment of the Cholistan. As endorsed by Chaudhary<sup>29</sup>, that women in Cholistan are poverty stricken as majority of them still living life in scarcity of resources in all spheres of life.

There are no formal sources (schools and *madrassas*) for getting religious education and learning how to perform mandatory obligations. It is difficult for outsiders to access the area without specialised vehicles made for traveling in the desert areas, therefore, Cholistan has been seriously ignored by public and private development agencies due to its hard access, scorching heat and severe weather conditions<sup>30</sup>.

In its life threatening environment of Cholistan, survival is primary concern for the inhabitant of the area, which is why religion did not have much preference and importance in lives of women. Her gender assigns secondary role in nomadic culture of Cholistan which further weakens her relation with the religion because of restrictions on her independent travelling, interaction with people and staying away from home.

Although women of Cholistan are not much aware of Islāmic teachings and its obligatory practices, yet they have a strong affiliation and association towards religion. They rely on the knowledge shared by their male members who themselves collect it from their interaction with people from settled areas and hearsay. Religious knowledge and awareness of women in Cholistan were detrimental for the practice of Islām in their lives. As the study found that they had little knowledge and hence practice. The findings of the study are evident that living conditions and religion are directly related, since primary concern of people living in Cholistan is survival in the hostile environment. Therefore, learning and practicing religion became second or can say least priority for them.

For the women in Cholistan, religion is meant more for social identity and having pride than its implementation in the life. This revealed emotional attachment with the religion than rationally acting upon its teachings which expand to whole of social life. Besides, it shows their perception of having deep affiliation with Islām but they were little concerned with gaining religious knowledge and moulding their lives according to its teachings. Women were satisfied with little Islāmic knowledge and its practice, rest of the responsibilities are considered to be fulfilled by men. This sense is source of compensation and contentment for them and they thought themselves

free from performing obligatory prayers. The findings of the study are similar with the with a research in United Kingdom which asserted that Muslim and Jew men are more religious than women<sup>31</sup>.

Women were following several cultural practices in the name of religion. They were following religious personalities (*peer*) and visiting places as part of religion.

Similarly, Qur'ān clearly commands to the believers:

هُوَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ الْمَلِكُ الْقُدُّوسُ السَّلَامُ الْمُؤْمِنُ الْمُهَيْمِنُ الْعَزِيزُ الْجَبَّارُ الْمُتَكَبِّرُ ۗ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ<sup>32</sup>

He is Allah than Whom there is *La ilahaiilla Huwa* (none has the right to be worshipped but He) the King, the Holy, the One Free from all defects, the Giver of security, the Watcher over His creatures, the All-Mighty, the Compeller, the Supreme. Glory be to Allah! (High is He) above all that they associate as partners with Him.

Such places and people (*peers*) did not provide any religious education and understanding rather they put financial liability in shape of sacrifices and gifts. Such activities gave satisfaction to religious sentiments which distract focus of devotees from true spirit and teachings of Islām.

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- (25) Qur'ān: 17:9
- (26) Imam Bukhari, "Sahih Bukhari", Hadith: 7
- (27) Qur'ān: 7:59
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