

Issues/Discussion Forum

The Myth of Jahiliyyah

- Arshad Alam

As Muslims, we have always been told that life in pre-Islamic Arabia was barbaric, nasty, brutish and short. We are told that before the advent of Islam in that part of the world, girls were buried alive, men could have as many wives as possible and that generally the status of women was very low. Rules were seldom maintained and it was Islam which brought order within such a chaotic society. This characterization of pre-Islamic Arabian society has been so much drilled into the consciousness of an average Muslim psyche that questioning it has become difficult even when there are manifest clues to the contrary.

The age of Jahiliyyah (ignorance), as it came to be called was very nearly a period of darkness. And just as Enlightenment delivered Europe into modernity through the dark ages, Islam delivered geography and its people through darkness into a new dawn. In its modern reading according to Syed Qutb and Maududi, large parts of the world are still in the age of Jahiliyyah and are waiting for Islam to deliver them from their self-imposed darkness. Just as the Europeans convinced us that colonialism was good for us, Islamists are out to prove that Islam will be good for the entire world. The claim rests on the assertion that Islam brought humanity to the Arabs and one measure of that humanity was its treatment of women.

But how accurate is this narrative? It seems that in our zeal to associate everything praiseworthy with Islam, we have falsified history and the Arabs in particular have belittled their own historical past. There is certainly a sense in which some of the laws and practices of the pre-Islamic period continued into Islamic times. For example, hajj was made possible every year because of the tribal mores that forbade killing within that month. Before the pilgrimage was Islamised as the 'hajj', the society therein had evolved some laws which they put into practice. If the society was so anarchic, as claimed by Muslims, then certainly the annual pilgrimage which later became the hajj would not have been possible. After the Prophet proclaimed Islam and made the hajj, he was protected by the same tribal values of people who were not only not Muslims but also hostile to the new religion.

It is true that pre-Islamic Arabian society resolved their conflicts through blood feud. It is also true that Islam tried to control some of this conflict. But then, throughout the world, blood feud was a common method of conflict resolution in tribal societies. Moreover, even Islam could not put a moratorium on such perpetual inter-generational conflicts. The descent into violence immediately after the death of the Prophet can only be understood as falling back on the tribal ways of conflict resolution.

Another important contention has been that Islam improved the status of women in Arabian society. Now it might be the case that female infanticide was practiced in Arabia at that time. But then it was by no means unique to the region. Various tribal and non-tribal societies have had this practice and most of them did not need Islam to overcome this horrible practice. It just died its own death.

The special privilege that Islam claims as the reason why this practice stopped is therefore unfounded. Also, the contention that men in pre-Islamic society could take as many wives as they desired seems untrue. What seems to be the case is that there were many types of union which were possible earlier. The specific contribution of Islam seems to be the introduction of a new normativity in marriages which was called Nikah. In making Nikah as the standard form of marriage, Islam considerably lowered the diversity which was practiced earlier in terms of recognised sexual unions.

The claim that Islam gave an exalted status to women is also an exaggeration. Muslim scholars are quick to point out that the first wife of the Prophet, Khadija, was a highly successful businesswoman and this is cited as a proof that the adoption of Islam led to women's empowerment. What we forget however, is that the marriage between Khadija and the Prophet took place during pre-Islamic times. So, Khadija was a successful businesswoman not because of Islam but despite it. The very fact that she inherited wealth also belies the claim of those Islamists who argue that Islam gave property rights to women. The case of Khadija demonstrates that property rights for women existed in pre-Islamic Arabia; Islam merely re-affirmed this practice. It must also be pointed out that the proposal for marriage was initiated by Khadija and not from the Prophet's side. This again tells us that women in pre-Islamic Arabia were considerably independent and did not depend on men to take important decisions.

It should also be borne in mind that till the time Khadija was alive; the Prophet did not take another wife. While this is regarded as Prophet's devotion to his wife, it can also be

read in another way. Marriage contracts were not the specific contribution of Islam; it existed even before Islam. Women were free to put conditions in that contract, a practice which Islam continued when it became the dominant power. It is not entirely unfeasible to think that the Prophet was bound by a contract which forbade him from taking another wife till the time Khadija was alive. We know that the Prophet married many times after the death of his first wife, and not all of them were for reasons of making political alliances as many Muslim apologists tell us.

Thus what we call Jahiliyyah may not after all be a period of darkness. Like any other society, women belonging to different classes had different rights and statuses. What seems to have happened might just be the opposite. That in trying to make one standard rule for all, Islam in the process diminished some of the rights which women enjoyed earlier.

(Courtesy: New Age Islam)
