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Research Article

Polygamy in Islam: The Truth Unveiled

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Abstract. Marriage in Islam is a sign of god's power and glory. The Quran says: "From his signs is that He has created for you spouses from yourselves that you may get peace and tranquility through them; He placed between you love and mercy. In these are signs for the people who reflect". Islam did not invent the system of polygamy. It existed long before Islam came into the scene of world events. When it came into world scene in the seventh century of the Common Era, it inherited the existing marriage system. It is to the credit of Islam that it modified and reformed the system in existence at the time firstly by limiting the number of wives a person could have at a time i.e. four and secondly it put stringent conditions on a person who wanted to marry a second wife like his ability to maintain

and provide for the family, to be fair and just to both the wives and so on. Islam is a practical religion; its laws are in line with human nature. It does not deny natural forces in humans; rather it confronts them and provides guidance to control the peace in society. If a man wants to fool around, Islam will hold him responsible and tie him down to duties towards that second wife and her children. If we talk of western countries, almost all have forbidden polygamy but adultery is most rampant in these countries. Many married men have mistresses or are involved in extra-marital affairs resulting in higher divorce rates, broken families and children growing without fathers. This paper explores the concept of polygamy and rulings through the realm of Quran and Hadith. It also clears the misconception associated with the eleven marriages that our beloved Prophet Muhammad¹ (SAW) solemnized and it also brings to bear that how Islam has given clear guidelines on all kinds of relationships: monogamy to polygamy.

Keywords: Polygamy, polygyny, polyandry, Surah Nisa, Hadith, Prophet Muhammad's marriage.

INTRODUCTION

The Quran refers to the woman as Mohsana i.e. fortress against the evil. And if a woman who is good and marries a man, she prevents him from going on the wrong path and keeps him on the Siratul- Mustaqeem i.e. the correct path.

Anyone who marries completes half his Deen. Does it mean marrying twice completes full Deen? No, it means when you marry, you shield yourself from proniscity fornication, homosexuality which leads to half the sin in this world. Only when you marry, you have the opportunity to become a husband or a wife, you become a father or a mother.

Talking about polygamy - it is permissible in Islam. Polygamy actually describes a person who has more than one spouse. It is divided into two categories;

1. Polygyny: In which a man has more than one wife.
2. Polyandry: In which a woman has got more than one husband.

Normally people think polygamy means only man can marry more than one wife. But actually polygamy means both- A person having more than one spouse (either wife or husband).

If we analyze other religions / religious scriptures e.g. Hindu scriptures, we find most of the kings had several wives. King Dashrath² had more than one wife namely Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, Sunitra. Lord Krishna³ had several wives – Rukonini, Satyabhana, Jambavati, Nagnajiti, Kalindi, Mitravinda, Bhadra and Lakshmana.

¹ The last messenger of Allah who brought Islam into existence

² King of the kosala kingdom and a scion of the suryamvansa dynasty in Hinduism, he was the father of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna.

³ One of the most widely revered and most popular of all Indian divinities, worshipped as the eighth incarnation (avatar) of the Hindu god Vishnu and also as a supreme god in his own right. He is the god of protection, compassion, tenderness and love.

If we read Jewish scripture, the Jewish law allowed polygyny in 11th century. It was only when Rabbeinu Gershom ben Judah⁴ of Mayence passed a synod⁵ and said polygyny should not be allowed. But it was still practiced by Septranik Jewish Community in Muslim countries until the chief Rabbinate of Israel put a ban on it in 1950.

The Bible too allowed polygamy⁶. Many holy personalities of the Bible had many wives or concubines at the same time. Abraham had Sarah and Hajar. Abraham was first blessed with a son through Hajar whom he named Ishmael and then he was blessed with another son through Sarah whom he named Issac. If we take the example of Jacob, he had four wives and concubines. Leah and Rachel were his wives and he was gifted Bilhah and Zilpah (slave-girls) by them. David had at least eight wives and is talked about in The Second Book of Samuel.⁷ It was only from late 1890's that the church put a ban on it.

In India, the Indian law allowed a Hindu man to have more than one wife. It was only in 1954, when the Hindu Marriage Act was passed, polygamy was made an offence. The Quran is the only holy book which clearly mentions in Surah Nisa chapter 4, verse 3 i.e.

"You can marry women of your choice, in twos, threes, or fours but if you cannot do justice, marry only on".

In pre-Islamic Arabia, men had several wives. Some people even had hundred wives. Islam put an upper limit to polygamy i.e. a maximum of four, and if a man cannot do equal justice between them, then only one is sufficient and permissible. In Surah Nisa Chapter 4 verse 12, it is mentioned:

"It is very difficult for a man to be just between his wives"

Thus polygamy is an exception not the rule. People think that Islam says you should compulsorily marry more than one wife, but that's not the truth. Polygamy is permissible but not a mandatory ruling. There is no Hadith in Quran which says that if a man marries more than one wife, he becomes a better Muslim than one who has only one.

Looking at the life history of Prophet's married life, people pose a question as to why did he have eleven wives if the Quran prescribes a maximum of 4 and if one can't do justice then only one.

⁴ Famous Talmudist and Halakhist

⁵ Local or provincial assembly of bishops or officials to resolve questions of discipline or administration

⁶New Testament passages in Pastoral Epistles: Timothy 3:2, Timothy 3:12 and Titus 1:6.

⁷ The concept of polygamy and the Prophets marriages, Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, al-islam.org

If we analyze Prophet's married life we come to know that all the marriages of the Prophet, other than Bibi Khatijah, had a good political or religious rationale and not the sexual desire.

The first marriage that he solemnized as stated above was with a highly respected lady of Mecca by the name of **Khadijah bint Khuwaylid**. She had been a widow twice and was 40 years of age while Prophet was only 25 years old. Bibi Khatijah was married to Prophet for 25 years until her death. Imagine if he would have married for sexual pleasure, he would have married younger unmarried woman. Why would he marry a woman 15 years elder to him and also a widow twice? And till the time Bibi Khatijah (r.a) was alive, Prophet (saw) did not take any other wife because he loved his wife dearly and she was one of the strongest pillars of support in promoting his cause. During the last 13 years of his life, Prophet married other wives.

Sawdah bint Zam'ah: She was a Muslim lady whose husband had died in Abyssinia. When she returned to Mecca, she couldn't seek shelter with her father and brother as they were not only infidels but also enemies of Islam. They were so much opposed to Islam that they could even torture her to death. The Prophet, now a widower himself, married Sawdah to provide protection to her as well as to forge important link of kinship with his opponents.

Zaynab bint Khuzaymah: She was the widow of Abdullah bin Jahsh who was martyred in the Battle of Uhud. She was known for her generosity and was famous as Ummul masakin i.e. the mother of the poor. She was going through a lot of hardships and Prophet wanted to maintain her prestige, and so he married her. But unfortunately Zaynab died within a year of her marriage to Prophet.

Umm Salamah: She was known for her piety and wisdom. When she became a widow and had orphan children, Prophet married her. She was also the sister of the chief of a powerful Meccan tribe of Makhzum. Thus this step was a step forward to forge the link of kinship with his opponents in Mecca.

Juwayriyyah bint al-Harrith: She was from Banu Mustaliq tribe- a very powerful tribe and at loggerheads with Islam. This tribe was taken as slaves by the Islamic army. Juwayriyyah, the daughter of the chief of the tribe had become a widow; Prophet set her free and married her. Impressed by this nobility, the entire tribe of Banu Mustalia became Muslim. Thus by this marriage a hostile tribe was transformed into an ally.

Bibi Maimuna: She was the sister of the chief of tribe of Najad which killed 70 Muslim men of Islamic deputation. When she became a widow after the death of her second husband, she came to Prophet and gifted herself to him if he would accept her. She only desired the honor of being called "the wife of the Prophet". The

Prophet accepted her as his wife and after their marriage; the tribe accepted Madina as their leadership and accepted prophet as their leader.

Umme – Habiba: She was the daughter of chief of Mecca, Abu Sufiyan who was a bitter enemy of Islam and planned battles after battles against Muslims. When her husband Ubaydullah ibn Jahsh became Christian, she separated from him and returned to Madina. Prophet, in order to give her protection and also soften the heart of Abu Sufyan married her. This marriage played a role in the conquest of Mecca.

Safiyyah bint Huyaiy Ibn Akther: She was the daughter of the chief of Banu Nadhir- a powerful Jewish leader of Khaybar. Safiyyah was taken as a captive by Muslim forces after her husband died in the battle of Khaybar. To maintain her noble status, Prophet married her and established marriage ties with her Jewish tribe.

Hafsa bint Umar ibn al- Khattab:- She was the daughter of Hazrat Umer and became a widow after the death of her husband in battle of Badr. This marriage brought the companions closer.

Aisha bint Abu Bakr: She came to the household of Prophet after his migration to Medina. She was the youngest wife of the Prophet.⁸ This marriage sealed the alliance with Abu Bakr so that he would be on the side of Muslims during the confrontation against the idol worshippers of Mecca.

Zaynab bint Jahsh: She was a cousin of the Prophet; and was a widow and divorcee as well. She was earlier given into marriage to Zayd who was an Arab slave and was adopted by Prophet. After adoption he was called Zayd bin Muhammad. When Zaynab came to know that she was from a nobler descent than Zayd, their relationship became sour and finally Zayd divorced her when her attitude didn't change even after Prophet's counseling.

It was during this time that adoption was declared void in Islam by surah al-Ahzaab chapter 33 verses 4 and 5. Almighty Allah ordered the Prophet to marry Zaynab the divorcee of Zayd in order to eradicate the whole system of adoption. Here we can see that these marriages of Zaynab served to enforce two important social principles of Islam: Firstly equality amongst Muslims irrespective of their ethnic or social distinctions; and second, it demonstrated the fact that a fostering or adoptive relationship was not a tie of blood and should not be a barrier in marriage.

So we have seen that when Prophet Muhammad was young and wealthy, he had only one wife. But in the last thirteen years of his life when he was over fifty, he married different wives- with the exception of one, all were widows and old. All the marriages he did were based on improving the Community and to better the relationship and not for sexual purpose.

⁸ At-Tabari, a famous Muslim historian writes that she would be 15 or 16 as Abu Bakr's children were born in pre Islamic era; [Tar'rikh at-tabari, vol 2, (Beirut: al-alamia.n.d)p.616]

In order to justify polygamy in the realistic world let us take a situation where a young lady gets married and within a few months of her marriage, she has an accident and becomes handicapped and cannot satisfy her husband. The only option left with the husband is that he keeps the first wife and marries a new wife or he first divorces the first wife. Or there can be a situation where a wife may get seriously ill; she has a disease where she is unable to take care of her husband and kids. Under such conditions it is more advisable that the wife shares her husband with another lady who not only will look after her but her children as well. Here we can raise a question as to why won't a husband hire a maid servant or nurse. The maid will surely look after the children and the ailing wife but who will look after the husband. So the best option is that the husband keeps his first wife, take another wife and treat both of them equally.

Another situation can be that after several years of marriage, the couple has got no children and both of them are longing to have one. Wife here can give her husband the permission to marry another wife and can fulfill the desire of having children.

In India with the ongoing practices of female feticide and female infanticide, the number of females is lesser than the rest of the world. Men tend to lose their life in battle fields, accidents and due to cigarette smoking than females, so in order to keep a balance between the lives lost and the number of females, it can be very well assumed that the logic of permitting polygamy under Islam stands justified in the practical world.

CONCLUSION

Polygamy is not something a man can play with, it is allowed in Islam but under certain conditions. A man can't go for it as a matter of right. Marriage is a sacred institution; it cannot be played with in the name of religion. It is an irony that people take up things without actually knowing what is ordained. Religion cannot be practiced on here say – like 4 marriages are allowed so I am going to solemnize at my whim.

Polygamy covers both polygyny and polyandry. It is applicable to both men and women. A man has been given a degree higher than a woman but with regard to the responsibility and not superiority. A man is to said to be Qwamman which comes from the word Iqamah i.e. to stand up like when we give Iqamah before prayers-we stand. This responsibility should be carried out by mutual consent of both husband and wife. Unfortunately, when we look at the present scenario, we see that this concept of four marriages is being used as a tool by men who are Muslims as well as non-Muslims (they convert and solemnize marriages). This is not what is ordained. In turn, men are committing bigger sins by playing this stupid polygamy

card on their wives. Men are protectors and maintainers of women for Allah have given them more strength to provide for the wives. Women have no less right than that of men but Allah has been generous enough to relieve them from the maintenance part, though situations have changed today because now more men sit at home and women work.

Thus we can conclude that though polygamy is allowed but it is to be undertaken when situation demands not as a matter of right and to desert wives. This is neither prescribed in the Holy Quran nor mentioned in any Hadith.⁹

⁹ This article is the outcome of various verses of Quran, hadith and the lectures of Islamic scholars listened to.