

# **A study of Girls' Madrasas in India**

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## **Introduction**

This essay deals with the question of girls' Madrasas in India. Present day Madrasas in India exist as either private or government-aided institutions of (largely) religious education. In the absence of a central regulating authority, most Madrasas determine and follow their own curriculum. As such, they constitute an important site where notions of selfhood, community and, by extension, the Other are created. An analysis of the process of the formation of these gendered selves and the socio-political and economic contexts of class and caste in which these selves are formed would make a significant contribution to the study of religious pluralism in India.

I would also like to look at the issue of the negotiation and transformation-if any- of gender identities and if, in any instance, these selves come into conflict or tension with community practices, especially a despairingly backward minority community. A related issue that I would like to discuss in the course of this paper is the role envisaged for women graduating from these institutions. I would also examine the extent to which a madrasa education leads to the formation of social networks of women?

A larger question that this paper seeks to address is how the discourses of nationhood and liberal feminism, with its ideas of freedom and individual autonomy, have informed the debate on Muslim women's education in India. Debates regarding madrasa education in India focus largely on the question of reforms and modernisation. This is necessary in order to mainstream a beleaguered minority. However, the terms of these debates, framed between modernity and orthodoxy, the secular and the sacred, the nation-state and a religious minority, the progressive and the illiberal, themselves remain unchallenged and unchanging. However, interestingly, debates regarding modernization and madrasas are not new. They are similar to late 19<sup>th</sup> century debates on colonial and madrasa education and the division between the

sacred and secular, an idea hitherto unknown in the madrasa education system. Talal Asad (1993: 207) writes that Enlightenment rationalism led ‘to the construction of religion as a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependant on private institutions and practiced in one’s spare time. This construction of religion ensures that it is part of what is *inessential* to our common politics, economy, science and morality’. Joan Scott has argued with regard to the “herstory” mode of history writing for women that it attempts to fit a new (or previously ignored subject) into received categories and women’s actions are interpreted within the dominant historiographic tradition in question (Sarkar: 2008: 13). Applying this idea to the study of girls’ madrasas, I would like to argue that our exploration of notions of self and community must take place outside the purview of the category of liberal feminism or even, what has come to be described as, ‘Islamic feminism’.

I will begin with a brief introduction of the women’s movement in India, especially on the question of religion and gender. I will then discuss the history of Muslim girls’ education in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As I will discuss later, a number of present day curriculum and programmes of study for girls draw on 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries ideas of reform and thus, it helps to put into perspective the education imparted in present day madrasas, which is discussed in the following section, and allows us to trace continuities and changes from the past. The conclusion sums up the questions raised in the introductory section and the inferences that can be drawn from the other sections.

## **The Women’s movement in India**

A major shift in the feminist movement came with practitioners and theorists beginning to reconsider the subject of feminist politics in the 1980s and 90s. This period saw the rise of right-wing movements and the presence and active participation of women in these. Also, issues such as the Uniform Civil Code, the controversy around Shah Bano and the Mandal Commission Report all confirmed that any

discussion on the empowerment of women was incomplete without a consideration of other identity markers such as caste, class, religion, etc.

The 1980s saw a new phase of the women's movement, with a number of autonomous women's groups coming up. Legal campaigns and legislative action became popular strategies of effecting change in the 1980s. However, there were dissident voices. Kishwar, Vanita and Agnes pointed out that law, without its proper implementation, would be ineffective in bringing about change. Omvedt said that in a patriarchal society, the interpretation of law would also be similar and argued in favour of a mass-based militant politics. However, she also emphasises the special role played by the small socialist-feminist groups in 'developing a perspective for the women's movement within larger working class struggles' (Menon: 2004: 6-7).

Similarly, Haksar also argued that a constant appeal to law is 'a substitute for the other harder option of building a movement for an alternative vision. For instance, the struggle within a tribal community to evolve new, more equitable customs is far more difficult than filing a petition under article 14 (Menon: 2004: 7).

However, there are also a number of feminist movements that place themselves outside of the human rights discourse. While it is important to note that not all of them demand the same rights and freedoms, it is, however, significant that they draw their arguments on gender justice and equity from religious sources. Vatuk (2007: 7) points to the formation of the All India Muslim Women's Personal Law Board in 2005 which refers to the authority of the Quran in its struggle for gender equality and claims the need for an alternative to the All India Muslim Personal Law Board as it is not 'a true reflection of the intention of the Quran'. There are various others too such as Daud Sharifa and STEPS in Tamil Nadu.

Ahmed points out that there are serious debates within the Jamaat-i-Islami too regarding the status of women and there are various critiques of Maududi's position on women by present day Jamaat members. Ahmed (2008: 16) refers to these dissenting voices, which began in the 1980s and became stronger in the 1990s, as Islamic feminism. An interesting example of the subversion of traditions happening

from within is the instruction of the Jamaat to its women members to preach the Jamaat ideology to their families and to disobey their husbands and guardians if they are 'against Allah' (2008: 11).

It is the nature of the Indian polity that it engages with individuals not as abstract citizens but in terms of certain categorical identities. Hasan (2009: 5) points out that this seriously upsets the coherence of a single category of women. A recent example of this is the debates surrounding the Women's Reservation Bill where a number of political parties and groups demand sub-reservation on the basis of various other categories before the Women's Reservation Bill can be passed.

### **The Mother as Madrasa: A History of Reform**

Calls for religious reform began as a response to colonialism, especially in the aftermath of the events of 1857. Women's education was a controversial debate in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, drawing a range of opinions. Women were envisaged as repositories of civilization and rulers of the domestic sphere- a refuge for Islam from the decadence and corruption of the public space (Robinson: 2008: 11-12). Reformers spoke about the need for Muslim women to be educated in order for them to become better wives and mothers, forge nation and community.

Although the first calls for gender reforms and women's education came from male reformers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the issue was also taken up by women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Insha-yi Mufid un-Nisa* [Beneficial Compositions for Women], written at the behest of Director of Public Instruction for North West and Oudh Girls' School by Abdullah Khan in 1872 described an exchange of letters between a girl and her female teacher discussing household responsibilities and duties. This book was controversial, however, as letter writing was not a practice that was normally encouraged among girls (Aftab: 2008: 394-400). Another tract by Munshi Ahmad Khan, written in 1904, includes cooking recipes and home remedies for ailments as the desirable curriculum for girls' education. However, Zahir Bilgrami, writing in 1873 argues that girls should also read the religious texts prescribed for boys since it is a misinterpretation of Quranic verses that have led to women's subordination in society. His primary

concern was to enable women, and especially widows, to take care of themselves. Inayat Husain (1869) is in favour of women's education to enable them to become better wives and mothers. To this end, he recommended the formation of local communities of elites to supervise the education in government and privately-run schools and warned against the deleterious effects of romantic tales on the morals of young women. Abdul Rahim Khan's 1874 writing, later adopted as a textbook for government run girls' school in north India, talks about the importance of girls' education to teach them how to better manage their household economy and relations with the in-laws after their marriage (Aftab: 2008: 394-400). Maududi, too, was in favour of educating women to enable them to become good mothers and housewives (Ahmad: 2008: 557). He also cites the Begum of Bhopal as a role model for Muslim women. Rashid Jahan, outspoken writer of the Urdu Writer's Progressive Movement, criticized middle-class ideas of respectability which allowed the oppression of women (Minault: 1998: 278). Muhammad Amin Zubairi in *Muslim Khwatin ki Talim* describes the Silver Jubilee session of the All India Muslim Educational Conference in 1925. Attiya Begum addressed the session from behind purdah, condemned the narrow-minded policy of Muslims towards women and demanded a separate university for Muslim women.

In the process, however, Robinson argues that these reform movements, which began as a reaction to colonial modernity, also became a modernising force in their own right. A sense of personal responsibility before God, self-conscious self-examination and the need to act on earth and fashion a new Islamic society in order to achieve salvation were important strains of the reform movement thought. Self-examination and the emphasis on individual will was as important in the case of women as men as the responsibility of fashioning a new Islamic society was placed on women. Deobandi reformer Thanavi's *Behishti Zewar* [Heavenly Ornaments] instructs women to regularly examine and retrospect in order to "ensure the purity of their intentions" (Robinson: 2008: 264). Thus, notions of transformation of the self in order to transform and refashion the community led to a growing discussion of family and domestic life in the public domain.

This was an interesting debate between colonial and madrasa education and as it turned out, between the sacred and secular, an idea hitherto completely new in the

madrassa education system. In this it might have borrowed from Enlightenment Rationalism, but it played out in more complex ways than a 'liberal evaluation' of the process might recognize. While perfecting a certain kind of behaviour for use in the private domain, the inner transformations were sometimes more overtly political (and even public). Interestingly, religion while reduced to a set of principles, which could be argued to be a modern concept, was by no means considered inessential. In fact, it formed the cultural, ethical moorings of the community – the public perceptions of the community were thus sought to be privately formed. In this, while the madrassa essentialized that divide, it also subverted it.

However, it is interesting to note that, as Minault points out, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century efforts at reformation were aimed at upper middle class and middle class (*Sharif*) women. It should also be noted that the 'role models' of reform all belonged to urban upper-middle class and middle class families. Their husbands, either professionals or in the government services wanted modern, educated wives who could, for instance, host and attend mixed parties. The advice literature admonished the feudal elite as decadent, the *nouveaux riche* as too westernized and also showed contempt for lower classes and their corruption of religious practices in popular culture. Thus, 'educated service-gentry respectability, marked by purified religion and refinement, hard work and restrained budgeting,' was the objective (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2004: 24).

This was also a time when urban Hindu elites were aspiring for positions in the state administrative system and becoming assertive in their demands for the use of Devanagari in official businesses. However, despite the growing differences between Hindu and Muslim urban elites, which were reflected in a number of instances such as the division of and the attribution of moral qualities to Hindi and Urdu (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2004: 17- 25), there are striking parallels between the class politics in the advice literature for women of the two communities. Sangari (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2004: 26) points to a 'Brahmin-Ashraf collaboration' and gives the example of *Stri Updesh- Do Larkiyon ki Kahani* by Munshi Ahmad Husain written in 1873 for a Farsi madrassa. Thus, while Hindu women were meant to act with 'maryada', Muslim women were called upon to show '*akhlaq*' (morality) and '*adab*'

(manners, etiquette), 'shielding themselves and their families from contamination by the poor (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2004: 24).

Often, in the historiography of *Sharif* women's reform movements, nationalism and liberal feminism get intertwined. This is particularly true of reform movements relating to Muslim women in the late 19th and early 20th century. In an extract from a book *Father and Daughter* by Jahan Ara Shah Nawaz on her father Mian Muhammad Shafi, Education Member of the Viceroy's cabinet in 1920, "Father asked us to discard the veil and we went out to the New Market without 'burqas' for the first time in our lives...he had been carefully watching the progress of Hindu women and had felt for some time that Muslim women must give up 'purdah' and take their place in the building of the nation" (Minault: 1998: 271-2).

It is also revealing that a secular left (or feminist) historiography of these movements perceives these as loss of agency. The self-perception of the subjects seems to have been different, though.

## **Present day Madrasas**

Before I begin a discussion on the state of girls' education in madrasas, it would be a useful exercise to place madrasas within the larger structure of educational institutions. In their study of madrasas in Uttar Pradesh, Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey (2004: 34) point out that private and government aided schools are sparse in rural areas, especially so in predominantly Muslim areas. Thus, in the context of the failure of the state education sector in U.P. to provide for the urban poor and rural masses of the population, madrasas must be seen as educational, and not Islamic, institutions (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2004: 34-35). Thus, in almost all cases, madrasas are a poor alternative for the urban poor and the rural population in the absence of other systems of schooling. Also, a number of madrasas provide education, boarding facilities, meals and, in some cases, medical care freely or for a nominal fee (Winkelmann: 2005: 90), a striking difference from the original role models of reform discussed above.

Of the approximately 35,000 madrasas in India, 8-10% are open to girls (Winkelmann: 2006: 107). These are affiliated to one of the following schools of thought that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: the Deobandi, Barelwi, Ahl-i Hadith, Nadwat al-Ulama, Jamaat-i-Islami Hind. There are remarkable diversities within girls' madrasas as most function as independent bodies, managed by a self-regulating committee.

According to a status paper of the Bihar State Madrasa Education Board, there are only 32 madrasas for girls under the government-aided category and 576 in the unaided category out of a total of 4000 madrasas out of which 1,118 are state-run Islamic schools. The UP board State Madrasa Education Board has 1,900 madrasas under it. However, of these, 170 madrasas are for girls.

It should also be noted that there is a great deal of diversity within Muslims as far as literacy levels are concerned. According to the Sachar Committee Report (2006: 49-62), despite the consistently low levels of Mean Years of Schooling (MYS) for Muslim children, there are many variations across states; it is lowest in states like West Bengal, UP, Assam, Uttranchal and Delhi and highest in Kerala, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. Again, there are differences within states; Ansari Muslims in Eastern U.P. and Bohras and Memons in Gujarat are better off than other Muslim castes in these areas.

### **The Objectives of Education:**

Madrasas are often seen as a 'civilizing mission' to benefit the poor and less educated classes (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2004: 40). In the understanding of women's role as repositories of culture and the importance placed on the domestic setting in the civilizing mission, many parallels can be drawn to the earlier reform movements: "[Education] is absolutely essential for a girl because she is going to have to run a home. She will rear her children in her lap. Children are a flower. Their supervision and care is the woman's work. If a girl is educated, then she can care for this flower" (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2006: 237).

They lay emphasis on domestic femininity; self-improvement and personal reform in order to become more competent wives, mothers and domestic managers (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2006: 231). Interestingly, the need for the protection of religion and correct religious practices comes up not so much in the context of the “depraved West” or the “Hindu Other” as middle-class urban biases about the rural poor. According to this view, then, education is, according to Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey, a process of gentrification.

Madrassa authorities also point to the religious merit of educating girls. A maulawi at a madrasa in Bijnor said, “In Islam, it is considered important to educate women. Just look at Hadrat Ruqayya and how learned she was” (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2006: 233). However, they differ on the amount of education that is considered suitable for girls. While one maulawi argued that girls should be taught as much as boys, saying, “If there is one person in a family, whether a boy or a girl, who has done hifz [committing the Quran to memory], then the sins of ten generations of that family’s ancestors will be forgiven”, another claimed that girls only need basic instruction in religious matters, just enough to know what Islam forbids and what it permits (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2006: 232).

However, the emphasis on religious merit often becomes a defensive strategy. A maulana in Bijnor said, “It is not necessary to study solely in order to obtain ‘service’. Education is essential” (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2006: 237). Madrasa systems are defensive and introverted with respect to mainstream systems of education and do not, in any way, subvert the structures that lead to the marginalization of Muslims in education and employment (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2004: 37). An example of this introverted strategy can be seen in Winkelmann’s study of a girls’ madrasa in New Delhi, run by a family closely associated with the Tabligh-i Jamaat. Here, girls come from poor and lower middle class and, mostly, lower caste families. Winkelmann observed that they had little knowledge of their immediate non-Muslim surroundings although they were clued in on developments in the larger ‘Muslim world’. And although, the madrasa authorities expect/encourage girls to have some knowledge of secular subjects before they come to the madrasa, girls rarely do.

However, in some cases, vocational training is also given. For example, Siraj ul-Uloom Niswan College at Aligarh, founded in 1948, by Sultana Begum and run by a committee consisting of Jamaat-i Islami members plans to introduce a Unani medicine course, college and hospital and a computer training centre for girls (Sikand: 2005: 222).

### **The curriculum for girls' madrasas:**

There is a considerable amount of variation in madrasa curriculum for girls, although, generally speaking, it constitutes a mix of religious and secular subjects. Some madrasas like the Jamiat us-Salihah, established by Jamaat-i Islami workers in Rampur in 1972, provide religious and secular education and follow the NCERT syllabus. This is also the case at Jamiat ul-Falah, a Jamaat-i Islami madrasa in Azamgarh where girls train to become alimas and fazilas and are also taught 'modern' subjects up to the high school level. A number of madrasas, such as the Jamiat ul-Banat, the management of which is associated with the Tablighi Jamaat, also follow the basic structure of the Dars-e-Nizami. However, sections relating to *fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence) are reduced to matters pertaining specifically to women. At Jamiat ul-Falah too, greater emphasis is laid on sections relating to women (Sikand: 2005: 219-222).

It might be said that in their division of the curriculum into the 'religious' and the 'secular', the primary framework within which all madrasas operate is *secular*. Religion or faith is not a perspective from which they seek to understand society or the state. It is at best a set of rules, mostly belonging to a separate realm of education. That is a secular understanding of religion.

Apart from Thanavi's *Behishti Zewar*, which is a popular text for girls' madrasas, the *Qiraat ur Rashida* in Arabic is also taught. This contains stories on the life of the prophet and his companions and deal with social etiquette and manners, for example, how to eat and drink properly, arrange and organize marriages, how to run a household, etc. (Winkelmann: 2008: 111). *Larkiyon Ka Islami Course* [Islamic Course for Girls], a popular 5 part textbook taught in a number of madrasas in North

India, instructs girls on cleanliness, hygienic food preparation, household budgeting, regulation and correct performance of prayers, etc.

*Akhlaq* and *amal* (actions) are also held to be important constituents of girls' education. Great emphasis is placed on the development of a pious and religious self and this is inculcated not only through formal education but also non-formal teaching methods: 'rules, discipline, bodily control and behavioural expectations' (Winkelman: 2008: 111) This embodiment of faith is an interesting practice and does lead to personal transformation within the individual.

In the light of the above discussion on the objectives and content of education, it would be interesting to analyse the impact of it. On the question of the future prospects of the graduates, madrasas established by different groups differ on the role imagined for its women graduates. A number of women, some of whom are the first women in their family to attain an education and find employment, take up teaching positions in girls' madrasas (Winkelman: 2008: 120). Deobandi madrasas enable women to become teachers in girls' madrasas in India and abroad, while at the same time laying stress on the stringent requirements of *pardah*. Jamaat-i Islami madrasas see their role as enabling women to become not only teachers and founders of madrasas, but also religious authorities in their own right. Some also take up the practice of the Unani system of medicine. The Mujahid madrasas of Kerala have gone a step further in arguing that it is perfectly acceptable for women to teach men, to take up other employment outside the household and work alongside men (Robinson: 2008: 271). However, it is also important to note that this is not always the case in practice. Some madrasa graduates also get married and settle down as housewives. A number of madrasa authorities in UP point to the restrictions on girls' attendance of madrasas once they reach puberty.

However, it is also true that tensions exist between the Islamic education attained by the girls and, as a consequence, the self-assertion by these girls, and the lived practices of community life. Winkelman (2008: 114) gives the example of a newly married overweight female teacher at the madrasa she studied. This teacher was under pressure from her in-laws and husband to lose weight but she argued that it was unislamic to lose weight in order to appear beautiful as one should appreciate human

beings the way god has made them. However, she also believed that obeying her husband was also her religious duty and was thus, caught in a dilemma. Interestingly, the dilemma for the female teacher is the apparent contradiction between two sets of, what she believes to be, religious principles. Thus, both her dilemma and choices are outside the purview of liberal feminism.

Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey (2004: 41) also argue that the education imparted in a large number of girls' madrasas is contrary to the lived realities of village life. Discussions on household economy and budgeting, for example, assume a cash-based economy whereas, in actuality, rural students go home to the 'seasonal, insufficient and often substantially non-cash character of rural incomes'. Winkelmann points to the differences between students at the madarsa she studied on the basis of their knowledge of Arabic, a marker of class hierarchies and urban-rural divide at the institution.

Maulawis, through a number of adverse comments on rural speech, manners and lifestyles, are often derisive about the families of their pupils (Jefferey, Jefferey and Jefferey: 2004: 242-243). They also claim that the trend to keep girls away from education after their attain puberty is a result of their rural outlook. Some tensions between the rural backgrounds of the students and the role of the madrasa as a "Civilizing mission" can be seen in the villagers' complaints that girls educated at madrasas become condescending of village life.

## **Conclusion**

The syllabus places special emphasis on the inculcation of *adab* or value education, meant particularly for women. It also appears that the education imparted in girls' madrasas not only aims at the formation of a pious Muslim female subject but also the 'gentrification' of the poor rural student.

Debates on the modernization and reform of madrasas, in which ulamas are pitted against the modern, liberal state or shown to welcome its interventions, centre around

the functionality of madrasas in providing employment and mainstreaming the Muslim minority. Often, the defensive response is that education is meant for religious merit. However, this response reiterates the categories of modernity and orthodoxy, instead of questioning it. Thus, this debate sometimes overlooks the other modernities that are being created in the process. For instance, the creation of a gendered self that finds its knowledge of Islam at odds with societal and familial expectations or in the fact that the madrasas though positioned against the nation, are sometimes aspiring to become a part of it.

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