From behind the curtain: a study of girls' madrasa in India
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1 Introduction

In late 2000 I submitted a PhD research proposal titled *The Construction of Islamic Knowledge in a Women’s Madrasa in Contemporary India*, intending to explore a ‘traditional’ institution of Islamic learning for young women in a society where Muslims form a minority. While in the initial setup of the study girls’ madrasas were framed as ‘traditional’ institutions of Islamic learning, this turned out to be problematic. During a brief pilot study in late 2000, carried out in Delhi and Hyderabad, my observations suggested that there was no historical precedent for having public, large scale girls’ madrasas. Even though girls’ madrasas were said to be modeled after the boys’ madrasas in terms of their curriculum, teaching methods, disciplining mechanisms, and the internal hierarchies reflected in the relations between the founders, teachers, and students, the emergence of public girls’ madrasas represents a ‘modern’ phenomenon, since the oldest public girls’ madrasas in post-Partition India were founded in the early 1950s.

The question I wanted to focus on was how girls’ madrasas emerged in India, how they are different from madrasas for boys, what notions of Islam and of the self are generated, and in particular what is taught in girls’ madrasas and if what is taught allows the young women to claim authority in Islamic matters in the public. With regard to academic literature about girls’ madrasas, their existence is mentioned in passing under the heading ‘Religious Education’ in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* (Barazangi 1995:409; Hoffman-Ladd 1995:328). But when I tried to find further information on the topic, it turned out that while there are substantial studies about boys’ madrasas in India¹, there were hardly any comparable materials available regarding their female counterparts.²

In order to understand the background of the relatively recent establishment of girls’ madrasas, I had to delve deeper into the educational past of the subcontinent. Academic sources on the colonial period suggested that late nineteenth century Muslim reformist ideas had influenced the establishment of the earliest public schools for Muslim girls (Minault 1998a). Islamic education for girls had mainly been a private matter prior to the late nineteenth century, but it then turned into a central issue of public interest. By the early twentieth century home education for girls that took place in the confinement of the women’s quarters (zenana) existed side by side with the first public schools for Muslim girls.³ Along with the first public schools for
Muslim girls, the overall increase in literacy, the emerging Urdu print culture, and the democratization of access to Islamic texts formed the background against which public madrasas for Muslim girls rooted in the standardized madrasa curriculum known as the *dars-e-nizami* could come into being. Although at first glance home teaching and formalized education appeared to represent opposites, in terms of their curriculum girls' madrasas today still bear witness to earlier forms of home teaching. As will be shown in Chapter 4, subjects such as *adab* or value education, lessons in Muslim ritual (*ibadat*), and 'home science', which includes cooking, stitching, and embroidery, are still valorized in girls' madrasas today.

While certain ideas and their histories are introduced through textual sources, the practices discerned through participant observation in girls' madrasas are equally important for this study. Apart from collecting, translating, and analyzing written materials, I needed to give this project a firm ethnographic rooting through fieldwork carried out in one particular girls' madrasa in New Delhi. Doing fieldwork in a girls' madrasa meant an opportunity to find out how young Muslim women relate to, generate, and transmit Islamic knowledge, what they define as Islam, and what perceptions of the self and the world shape their wishes for the future.

### 1.1 Introducing a first set of literature

What is taught in girls' madrasas needs to be located within the fields of Muslim girls' education and madrasa education for boys alike. As for the latter, writings such as Zaman's study on the 'modern' ulama's authority in India and Pakistan (Zaman 1999) and Malik's work regarding the social and institutional histories of a number of well known madrasas for young men in India and Pakistan (Malik 1997; 1996) are helpful for comparative purposes. With regard to the history of Muslim women's education in colonial India, Gail Minault's *Secluded Scholars* (Minault 1998a) sheds light on the early women's rights debates and the emergence of the first public schools for Muslim girls in the subcontinent. The late nineteenth century discourse on Muslim women's education emerged against the background of upcoming nationalist ideas of Hindu and Muslim groups. Making their case in favour of women's education, popular late nineteenth century Muslim reformers utilized arguments that reminded of nationalist discourses, wherein the role of women tended to be seen as crucial to social development.
moral standing. As the non-Muslim powers were on the rise, the reformers witnessed what they considered not just a political but a also moral decline. Since they saw a direct link between the preservation of what they perceived as un-Islamic customs and women, they argued that women needed adequate guidance to better their ways. As a result, the reforms aimed at transforming women into more competent wives and mothers, while at the same time Islam was to be cleansed of un-Islamic customs (Minault 1998a; Minault 1990; Metcalf 1990).²

Although the above developments in the field of women's education appear to be far from granting young Muslim women access to studying Islamic theology, my findings suggest that there is a link between the reformist discourse and the emergence of the first girls' madrasas. In fact, during fieldwork my interlocutors referred to the reformist ideas as the ideological background for the establishment of girls' madrasas. In addition, reformist writings like Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's *Bihishti Zewar* (*Heavenly Ornaments*) are still part of the curriculum in most (Deobandi) girls' madrasas today. In the girls' madrasa wherein I did fieldwork the *Heavenly Ornaments* is studied as part of Islamic law or *fiqh* (see Appendix II).

Moving away from the late nineteenth century Indian context, the following more theoretically informed studies have been a source of inspiration. In particular, Saba Mahmood's findings regarding the Egyptian mosque movement (Mahmood 2005; 2001) were crucial for putting the practices I observed in the girls' madrasa into perspective. Herein, Mahmood examines the concept of agency in a context wherein women appear to acquiesce in what non-participants may perceive as oppressive conditions. Urging to think in directions other than linking agency with progressive change and the normativity ascribed to freedom in feminist discourses, the cultivation of a pious self is acknowledged as a form of agency. Similarly, the concept of docility, re-read as the willingness to be taught, and Mahmood's critical approach to the notion of empowerment are pivotal for this study. In addition, the case studies in Lila Abu-Lughod's *Remaking Women* addressing the tension between the 'discourse of domesticity' (Abu-Lughod 1998:12) and the empowerment of women through the practice of participating in the public sphere were equally helpful. Although Abu-Lughod's discussions focus on more secular forms of education, in the case of the girls' madrasa similar tensions could be discerned. While the (informal) curriculum appeared to promote values associated with domesticity, in some sense the students were trained in participating in the public sphere by attending the madrasa at the same time, even if in seemingly limited ways. It is important to note that the
link between women’s education and discourses of domesticity is not specific to Muslim communities in India. My findings indicated that non-Muslim communities in India and elsewhere raise similar questions with regard to women’s education and access to public schools, concerning (separate) curricula, and with a view to preparing girls for marriage and motherhood. This suggests that apart from Muslim identities, gender and community are factors that are equally important for understanding the above concerns. With the broader context and the ongoing discussions elsewhere in mind, this study nevertheless focuses on India and on madrasa education for girls in particular.

1.2 Categorizing girls’ madrasas

In order to get a first impression regarding how girls’ madrasas function and what is taught, I initially visited a number of girls’ madrasas in Hyderabad and Delhi. I wanted to focus on girls’ madrasas at the secondary level for girls between roughly twelve and seventeen years of age, because puberty appeared to form a major divide between girls who stay at home to prepare for marriage and those who (are allowed to) continue their education. Even in relatively conservative Muslim communities, like the one wherein I did fieldwork, school attendance generally did not seem to be problematic for girls prior to puberty, but for the older girls the prospects of marriage and staying at home formed an alternative, especially when purdah or female seclusion is practised.

During the early stage of fieldwork, my observations suggested that there are different types of girls’ madrasas at the secondary level. Based on the main differences between the three categories, I developed the following distinction: To begin with, there are girls’ madrasas that are referred to as madrasas although their curriculum is not based on the standardized madrasa curriculum known as the dars-e-nizami. In such cases the term madrasa mostly stands synonymous for an Urdu medium school with some Islamic content. Generally modest dress is compulsory, the basic tenets of Islam are taught along with some Arabic, and ‘advice’ literature for young women like the earlier mentioned late nineteenth century Bihishti Zewar (Heavenly Ornaments), or the Ladhkion ka Islami Course (The Girls’ Islamic Course) are prescribed for reading. Since these schools are not distinctly oriented toward studies in Islamic theology, the girls’ madrasas of the first type remind of the first public schools for Muslim girls that emerged in the early twentieth century. Second, there are girls’ madrasas that combine the respective state cur-
riculum for secondary education with Islamic teaching. In these madrasas of the second or 'dual type' the degree to which Islamic subjects are taught varies. The Islamic component may range from prescribing modest dress for girls and teaching religious knowledge (*dini talim*), to the integration of subjects like Arabic, history of Islam, and observing set prayer times. Finally, there are girls' madrasas that are rooted in the standardized madrasa curriculum known as dars-e-nizami and offer more or less exclusively religious education for girls at the secondary level. In practice, even these madrasas of the third type often incorporate a minimum of non-Islamic subjects in their curriculum, such as mathematics, English, Hindi, and computer skills.

With a view to finding an answer to the question whether what is taught in girls' madrasas allows the young women to claim authority in the public, I did fieldwork in a girls' madrasa of the third type, because this seemed to be the place where such claims to religious authority were highlighted most.

1.3 **Introducing the wider location**

The girls' madrasa wherein I did most of my fieldwork was established in 1996 and hosted nearly two hundred students, who were roughly between twelve and seventeen years of age. Furthermore, the students were from a lower to lower middle-class background from all over India. The Madrasatul Niswan\(^\text{13}\) is located in an area of New Delhi named after the famous Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya who died in 1325 AD. Nizamuddin is commonly referred to as one of the large ‘Muslim pockets’ outside the walled city of Old Delhi. In addition, Nizamuddin’s shrine is known as the second largest place of pilgrimage after Chishti’s shrine in Ajmer (Rajasthan).\(^\text{14}\) The colony is divided by the wide Mathura Road with on one side Nizamuddin East, which is known for its railway station. On the other side there is the ‘settlement’ or basti Nizamuddin with its shrines, narrow alleys, and small bookshops.\(^\text{15}\)

Any approaching car has to park by the side of the main road on the outskirts of the basti, as there are no paved roads leading further inside. Initially I was not too familiar with the layout of the area, and so for the first two years of fieldwork my daily walks led me along the people begging by the side of the road, followed by the flower sellers in front of the shrine or dargah of Nizamuddin Auliya, the small restaurants and hotels whose owners distribute free food to those in need at set times, and finally the butcher shops Nizamuddin is famous for. As the narrow alleys or *galis* are lined with small shops, perfume, books, leather socks, skull-caps or *topis*, clothes, cassette tapes, cigarettes, sweets, and bread are on display. A few steps ahead
the residential area begins, which is characterized by the narrow facades of the houses. Just a little further inside the basti lies the street where the weekly market is held, and then there is a garbage dump on the very back of the residential area, behind which there are a few more houses, one of them being the Madrasatul Niswan. As if to make the building even more inconspicuous, the garbage is less than inviting to anyone not intent on seeing the madrasa from close by. Directly in front of the building lies a patch of wasteland, marked by a car wreck, pieces of metal, and goats walking about among playing children. Adjacent, there are a number of grave markers, opposite which lies the second famous Sufi shrine together with the office of the Inayat Khan Foundation. Regarding the choice of locality, the Madrasatul Niswan’s brochure states that ‘In the beginning, the Jamia neither had its own building, land, or any financial assistance. A kind-hearted woman donated her own house for this noble cause.’

In late 2003 the madrasa’s immediate surroundings underwent a makeover, owing to the New Delhi Municipal Cooperation’s and the Delhi Development Authority’s programmatic strive to fight encroachments. In addition, possibly the makeover also had to do with the presence of a large Hindu temple located right at the back of the madrasa and with the municipality’s strive to render the ‘forgotten’ areas of New Delhi more attractive for commercial activities and tourism. The makeover resulted in the diversion of the path leading to the madrasa, as the garbage dump and the adjacent group of modest houses inhabited by Hindus were fenced off. In lieu of the earlier route, one could walk directly toward the madrasa via a new path leading from Inayat Khan’s shrine and the slightly elevated grave markers toward the entrance of the building.

1.4 Fieldwork methods

Fieldwork began with a brief pilot study of three weeks in Hyderabad and Delhi in November 2000. During this first stay I visited some girls’ madrasas in Hyderabad and began to collect written materials on madrasa education. I tried to find literature on madrasa education at academic publishing houses, at university libraries, in Islamic bookshops in Hyderabad and Delhi, and at the offices of Muslim organizations such as the Hyderabadi Urdu newspaper Siasat. In addition, I interviewed local people in both cities who were associated with madrasa education in various ways, thereby hoping to find out something or the other about girls’ madrasas. The actual fieldwork began with my following stay in India from late September 2001 onwards,
when a first contact with the Madrasatul Niswan in Delhi was made. By February 2003 I returned to Leiden, and after visiting India again for three weeks in April 2003, I continued fieldwork from June 2003 until February 2004. Finally, the remaining gaps were filled in the course of writing up my dissertation in India from August 2004 until February 2005.

Doing fieldwork in the Madrasatul Niswan mainly meant participant observation. I followed classes as a student, observed interactions between teachers and students inside and outside the classroom, and occasionally taught English classes at the Principal’s request. Apart from the above ‘scheduled’ activities, the informal conversations that took place in the staff room were an invaluable source of information. While initially I tried to give these conversations direction in line with the interview questions in Appendix IV, the discussions began to flow more freely as our rapport grew. In the order of my contacts in the madrasa, my main interlocutors were the Founder, Manager, Principal, teachers, students, graduates, and sometimes their friends. Our conversations mostly took place in the front room, the staff room, the many sections of the small building designated as classrooms, the Manager’s home, and occasionally also in his friends’ shops close by. Due to this particular community’s outspoken aversion to (certain) things considered ‘Western’ and hence forbidden, using a taping device was not feasible. Instead, following each of my almost daily visits to the madrasa, I immediately took detailed notes to document what was said and also what the atmosphere was like. This strategy allowed me to trace in detail the often subtle shifts in openness and familiarity over time.

Most of our conversations took place in Urdu and Hindi, because I tried to take recourse to English only when something was too difficult for me to express in either language. Even though often all it took was a dictionary to clarify the issue in question, switching to English generally implied the sudden end of our conversations, because it instantly seemed to place me in the outsider’s position again, which was disadvantageous for the flow of our conversations and for our developing rapport. For the same reason I chose not to make use of a translator either, as the confrontational aspect of our mutually perceived ‘otherness’ turned out to be valuable for the unfolding of the project.

My observations also allowed me to chart out networks between teachers, students, and their families, which allowed for relevant insights regarding the organizational structure and social hierarchies in the madrasa. Especially in the case of what I refer to as ‘core families’ (see Chapter 3), such network structures played an important role. The ‘core families’ came from the same
social background as the Founder and the Manager of the Madrasatul Niswan. In addition, their younger female family members were virtually all enrolled in the girls’ madrasa as students, and some of the recent graduates had taken up teaching there. Their shared appreciation for and involvement in the work of the lay preachers’ movement known as the Tablighi Jamaat was another commonality. Apart from the young women belonging to the ‘core families’, for whom life inside and outside the madrasa mostly seemed to form a continuum, there were also students and teachers from rural backgrounds, who often were the only ones in their families to study or teach in a girls’ madrasa (see Chapter 5).

In order to protect the privacy of my interlocutors, I left out the names of the people I met in the Madrasatul Niswan, even at the risk of yet again presenting women in seclusion as faceless and anonymous. By the same token the name of the madrasa is fictitious. However, the name of the fieldwork site remained unchanged, because otherwise the project would have lost some of its intriguing features associated with the surroundings of the madrasa.

1.5 Outline of the remaining chapters

Chapter 2 examines absences and appearances of girls’ madrasas in contemporary debates. Although post 9/11 madrasa education became a much debated topic, mainly because of the alleged link between Islamic education and forms of violence, my initial findings indicated that not much is known about girls’ madrasas. For that reason the main question in this chapter concerns the emergence of girls’ madrasas as presented in Urdu literature and in English newspaper articles published post 9/11.

In keeping with the above concerns, Chapter 3 deals with the question of access to girls’ madrasas post 9/11. My initial contact with the men in charge of running the girls’ madrasa was crucial for being allowed to visit the madrasa regularly, owing to which questions dealing with the men’s educational ideas and social background are addressed. As the Founder and Manager were actively involved in a transnational organization known as the Tablighi Jamaat, the final section of this chapter investigates the relation between the girls’ madrasa and the lay preachers’ movement. The main issue at stake is how the informal affiliation with the Tablighi Jamaat may influence the curriculum of the madrasa and its underlying educational ideals.

Examining the curriculum and the educational ideals behind it, Chapter 4 situates the girls’ madrasa in the broader context of Islamic education.
Questions raised include how the madrasa curriculum for girls is different from the standardized curriculum taught in madrasas for boys and how what is taught in practice in the girls' madrasa deviates from the official curriculum. As value education (adab) with its underlying ideals of Islamic womanhood appears to be central to the madrasa's educational mission, questions pertaining to teaching methods and discipline are discussed. In order to put my observations into perspective, a 'dual type' girls' madrasa is introduced in the final section of this chapter. Herein, the question is addressed how the curricular differences between the two madrasas may have an impact on the future of the students.

In Chapter 5 the students' future trajectories are linked with the question whether what is taught in the Madrasatul Niswan allows the young women to claim authority in the public. Regarding the latter, it is of concern how the public is defined, because Muslims constitute a minority in India. In addition, the context of the girls' madrasa again appears to form a specific category. With a view to what the students do after graduation, their stories indicate that there are tensions between education, agency, and discipline. Against the background of these tensions, the last question raised is what it would take for the young women to claim authority in the public.

Chapter 6 revisits some of my initial thoughts and concepts with regard to madrasa education for girls. In line with Mahmood's findings, the question is raised whether what is taught in the girls' madrasa is empowering and if the notion of empowerment is helpful in this particular context. After discerning the underlying educational ideals of the curriculum along with its associated ideals of Islamic womanhood in the previous chapters, another question deals with the historical precedents of learned women that may challenge these ideals. By the same token, in the madrasa the young women's stories may challenge or tally with the same ideals. Finally, even if female religious authority is not in the process of emerging as yet, an equally important question is what the young women gain out of their training.
1. See Metcalf 1982; Faruqi 1963; Ahmad 1996; Ansari 1980; regarding the modern South Asian madrasas see Zaman 1999.

2. See for example Qamaruddin 1997, which includes a survey-like section on girls' madrasas.

3. This overview is based on Minault 1998 and Metcalf 1990.

4. Regarding the history of the dars-e-nizami, see Malik 1997.

5. Even though the Arabic word 'adab' is more commonly translated as 'manners', my data suggest that with regard to the subject 'adab', as taught in the girls' madrasa, it implied more than etiquette or manners. Since what is taught is broader than social etiquette, I use adab in the sense of value education. Keeping in mind that my definition includes social etiquette, other aspects are related to gender roles and practices of everyday life, as we will see in Chapter 4.

6. Although I visited more girls' madrasas in the course of fieldwork, doing ethnographic fieldwork in one particular madrasa for girls allowed me to build long standing relations and to gain an in depth understanding of what is taught and how the five-year training in the madrasa affects the young women's lives.


8. See for example the Introduction to Thanawi 1998.

9. The question of 'safe access' to public institutions for girls in seclusion or purdah deserves mention here. In Hyderabad, for example, I visited a girls' madrasa that utilized a fleet of school buses the windows of which were entirely covered by black curtains. The buses picked up the girls from home and once they reached their destination, the entrance to the madrasa was covered too like a tunnel. At one end the bus stopped to allow for the girls to descend, and the madrasa building was at the other end.


11. For the purpose of this study I use the term madrasa whenever it was used by my interlocutors. With regard to the categorization of girls' madrasas the following should be noted: in the case of madrasas of the first type, the word madrasa could be substituted by 'school'; while the second and third types represent madrasas in the proper sense. In India, it is quite common to prefix the word dini when making reference to madrasas of the third type, as these focus more or less exclusively on Islamic education. However, as the demarcation lines are often fluent between the second and third types, and because not everyone uses the term dini madrasas to refer to madrasas of the third type, I generally use madrasas in the sense of dini madrasas, unless indicated otherwise.
12. In this example purdah mainly stands for female segregation, while its other meanings, such as veiling and modest dress will be discussed at length in the following chapters.

13. Although the name is a pseudonym, my findings suggest that it is a common name for a girls' madrasa.

14. Nizamuddin's *khanqah* had a madrasa attached to it where scholars such as Shams al-Din Yahya, Fakhruddin Zarradi, Qadi Muhyuddin Kashani, and Fakhruddin Marwazi gave lectures (Momin 2001:63).

15. When approaching Nizamuddin by motorized rickshaw or 'three-wheeler', the drivers initially used to take me to Nizamuddin East, as there are not too many foreigners or *firangis* going to basti Nizamuddin. Some time later, when due to the heavy pollution and the cold I started using proper taxis regularly, the drivers thought that I wanted to go to the basti to pray for (male) offspring at the shrine.

16. Though post 9/11 the movement has come under closer scrutiny, the Tablighi Jamaat is generally referred to as an apolitical reformist movement. Founded in 1927 by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas in an area close to Delhi called Mewat, the movement emerged in reaction to Hindu missionary activities among Muslims. The movement assumed its present transnational character by the 1970s. For additional information regarding the history of the Tablighi Jamaat, see Sikand 2002. Concerning the life of its founder, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944), his succession, and the spread of the Tablighi Jamaat, see Masud 2000, 6-7.