UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

From behind the curtain : a study of girls' madrasa in India
Winkelmann, M.

Citation for published version (APA):
Winkelmann, M. (2005). From behind the curtain : a study of girls’ madrasa in India Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
The ‘men behind the curtain’ and the tablighi link

The following sections give a first insight into the setting wherein the actual fieldwork took place. As mentioned earlier, the onset of my fieldwork was influenced by the aftermath of 9/11. Madrasas increasingly drew public attention due to the alleged link between madrasa education and forms of violence. As a result, access to girls’ madrasas was problematic. Once a first contact with the Madrasatul Niswan was made, I first got to know the men in charge of running the madrasa from ‘behind the curtain’. It turned out that the men were affiliated with the lay preachers’ movement known as the Tablighi Jamaat, which seemed to have an impact on the worldview and educational outlook of the men in charge.

3.1 ‘Doing research’ post 9/11

During the planning phase of my fieldwork prior to 9/11 I intended to begin fieldwork by following up on my brief pilot study in Delhi and Hyderabad in late 2000. At that time, two staff members of the Henry Martyn Institute had introduced me to a girls’ madrasa in Hyderabad. However, in the aftermath of 9/11 the situation in Hyderabad and Delhi had changed significantly. When returning to the field in late September 2001, it became obvious that the new war on terrorism initiated by the United States also had an impact on the Indian setting and on the Muslim minority in particular. As a result, it was problematic to get access to girls’ madrasas, because madrasas in general had come under close scrutiny due to their alleged links with violence and terrorism, as we saw in the previous chapter. Against the background of the mainly negative publicity spread by the non-Muslim dailies, the odds of starting a research project on girls’ madrasas were anything but favourable. In addition, in Delhi I initially lacked the contacts I had in Hyderabad, owing to which I had to find a different point of entry.

To begin with, I called in the help of a colleague, who introduced me to local friends who accompanied me to a number of Islamic girls’ schools in Old Delhi. Moreover, I consulted directories of Muslim organizations
in Delhi, through which I found addresses and phone numbers of girls' madrasas. On the one hand, it turned out to be relatively easy to interview representatives of various Muslim organizations, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami-e-Hind, the Jamaat-e-Ulama-e Hind, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, the editor of the Milli Gazette, as well as university lecturers at the Jamia Millia Islamia University, the Zakir Husain Centre for Islamic Studies, the Jamia Hamdard University, and finally the Hamdard Education Society, at the time. Apparently a Muslim counter discourse was taking shape in reaction to the allegations voiced in the media and on the streets, owing to which many 'public figures' were eager to be heard. On the other hand, women working in girls' madrasas in Old Delhi seemed anything but eager to be heard, because all attempts at making contact over the phone or in person failed. Another practical problem was that whenever I tried to contact women by phone, I had to talk to the men, such as husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, or cousins, prior to being allowed to talk to the women I wished to speak to. Most of the time it did not even come to that, until a few weeks later I was finally allowed to meet two women working in a small girls' madrasa in Old Delhi. The entire family seemed almost apologetic about being so uncooperative at first, and they explained that recently they had heard about journalists, both Indian and foreign, who feigned interest in the madrasas only to write terrible things about them. In addition, these journalists had got their informants into trouble with the (non-Muslim) authorities.

After two or three visits to the family, during which I found out a little about the small neighbourhood girls' madrasa in question, I asked if I could accompany one of the women teaching there. The teacher replied that she would have to ask permission for such a visit first, as outsiders were generally not welcome in the madrasa and even more so foreign non-Muslims. After much haggling, ultimately the permission for me to visit the madrasa was not given. I even resorted to a different strategy by trying to get access to the girls' madrasa through the head of the council running it. Since nothing appeared to work, I decided to pay another brief visit to Hyderabad. There the scenario was similar and I was no longer allowed access to the girls' madrasa I had visited one year before. After I returned to Delhi, tensions seemed to ease slightly toward the end of 2001. With the help of a colleague, the initial contact with the Madrasatul Niswan in Nizamuddin turned out to be more fruitful, as I was allowed to visit regularly from late November 2001 onwards.
3.2 **A developing rapport**

One day, the *nazim* or Manager gave me permission to come to the madrasa regularly in the front office of the Madrasatul Niswan. This breakthrough was facilitated by his decision that I intended to do something useful with my research. While doing research was something familiar to him, it was something quite alien to the young women inside the madrasa, who continuously asked me which university in Delhi I was affiliated with, when I was going to attend classes, and why I spent my time with them when I had my own work to do. Similarly, during the first months of fieldwork my other-ness was a central concern. As a result, the students and others I met in the madrasa deemed it important to achieve my conversion to Islam.

Among those who wished to see me convert was an elderly Maulana, who introduced himself as a friend of the Founder and in charge of the madrasa's front office on the day I met him. We exchanged phone numbers, as he pointed out that he had some interesting reading materials for me. During my Urdu class later on the same day my cell phone rang, and after a short while I figured out that it was the same Maulana. He called to convince me to repeat *subhan allah* (all glory be to God) after him a number of times over the phone, thereby embracing Islam under his guidance for my own good, as well as his own.

A few days later, the Madrasatul Niswan's Manager let me know through one of the students that a befriended Maulana was waiting for me in his perfume shop in the nearby bazaar. Although I was aware that such contacts with men put me in an unfavourable light in the eyes of the young women in the madrasa, I nevertheless decided to meet the Maulana that day. In this case I hoped that my position as a researcher would grant me a small bonus regarding my respectability. When I arrived at the shop and the Maulana and I exchanged polite greetings, I noticed the presence of a young man, who looked at me a lot less favourably than his friend. Like the latter, he was a recent Deobandi graduate, and then the three of us sat down inside the small perfumer's shop, which was open toward the street, so that everything going on inside the shop was within sight for everyone passing by. The young graduate eyed me with an openly hostile look and kept his gaze lowered while the Maulana and I talked about everyday events in the girls' madrasa and his business. When the Maulana asked the young man what was wrong with him, he replied with a fiery glance that it was not right for his friend to talk to me, as I was not properly covered. Indeed, only my head was covered with a dupatta or scarf, and because I never wore a 'proper' *burqa* and hijab, the irritated young man expressed that I would go to Hell.
for that and left. This was not the first encounter involving 'eschatological negotiations', as earlier on the same day another Maulana had condemned me for being a Christian in the front room of the Madrasatul Niswan, claiming that I would surely go to Hell for that on the Day of Judgment. However, it also deserves mention that in the morning the Manager of the Madrasatul Niswan and in the afternoon the Maulana stood up for me, as they explained that in their eyes I was doing good work and for that reason I would not go to Hell.

A third episode took place some time later, once I had started teaching 'spoken English' at the Principal's request. I was with the final year students that day and we had finished our lesson from the English Reader when one of the girls asked me whether I had read the Quran. When I said that I had, the same girl asked whether I had performed the ritual ablutions (wudu) prior to touching the Quran. I had to admit that I had not performed wudu, trying to explain that I had read the Quran in university and that, in fact, a non-Muslim had taught me Arabic. While some of the students indicated that they got my point, the girl who had triggered off the discussion insisted that it was very wrong to know the ritual obligations without abiding by them, irrespective of the circumstances. She and her friend then continued to give me a detailed 'lecture' about wudu and explained how I should have performed the ablutions correctly. Once they had finished their lecture, the girls asked if now I knew how to perform wudu. When I said yes, hoping that thereby I would be able to make my way out of the situation, the girls insisted that I should repeat exactly what they had told me about wudu and how to perform it the right way. I took a deep breath and started all over again, being reprimanded sharply as I got the requirements wrong a few times with regard to when to start from the left and when to start from the right side. Having stood the critical test of so many learned ears, once I finished the girls said that now it was time for me to come with them and perform wudu to wash off my sins and embrace Islam. This time, I was 'saved by the bell', as class was over and the Principal badi appa came in and told the girls to stop.

Following the above lecture, the Principal suggested that it might be better if I continued teaching the third year students. But it turned out that this group of students was even more activist in their attempts at converting me than the earlier group. This time, without much ado or rhetoric the girls literally cornered me after class. As the ceilings were too low for me to stand comfortably without banging my head, I sat on the floor when they asked me whether I knew the Islamic profession of faith (kalimah). When I
said that I did, they urged me to recite it, thereby becoming a Muslim, or else I would go to Hell on the Day of Judgment. As their strategy failed, following another teaching session the same students resorted to calling in the help of a first year student, who spoke English well. She asked me if I knew Arabic and when I replied that I did, she asked if I also knew the Islamic profession of faith (kalimah). When again I replied that I did, she said that if I knew the kalimah, she wanted to hear it from me, or else she would not believe that I knew Arabic. When I countered that I knew what the recitation of the kalimah implied and that hence I did not think it appropriate for me to recite it, she gave it one last try saying that I if I knew Arabic and had read the Quran, there was no reason why I should not embrace Islam and recite the kalimah right now. In the end, she smiled at my persistent refusal, which she seemed to accept as the outcome of her attempt at persuading me to convert.4

Having sketched the above incidents from my point of view, the students’ perspective deserves mention as well. Keeping in mind that the madrasa with its underlying educational aim of bringing about personal reform trains the students in a particular style of call to faith (dawah), there I was as a perfect subject for trying out their different strategies. Still, when the Principal came to know about the above ‘incident’, she apologized on behalf of the students, saying that she had heard how they had ‘bothered me’. She suggested that it might be better if one of the teachers accompanied me for my classes from now on to keep the students from bothering me more. As a consequence, I gradually became more familiar with the other teachers and began to spend more time in the staff room, where my pending marriage was of great common interest. It was also then that the idea took root that this was an even better time for me to convert, as I could then convert my entire family-in-law as well. Knowing that my husband-to-be was a Hindu, the teachers repeatedly asked me whether he and his family did not have a problem with my coming to the madrasa regularly. My in-law’s ‘mixed’ (Sikh-Hindu) religious background and their lenience vis-à-vis my work became new topics for discussion. These conversations assumed a much more sympathetic tone than the situations sketched above, as the issue of my conversion seemed to gradually turn into a sort of ‘running-joke’ that provided an initial thread of continuity to our conversations in the staff room.

Following my wedding in November 2002 my position inside the madrasa changed once more. Despite my persistent refusal to convert, the teachers and students appeared to have come to terms with my otherness by assigning me the role of the new daughter-in-law or bahu, and soon that of an expectant mother. As most of them were familiar with both roles
in the Indian extended family system, my new standing within the family seemed to suffice for granting me a place among the teachers as well. At last I seemed to fit in, and following a period of struggle that had lasted for months, the situation began to change for the better. With our conversations moving away from the issue of conversion, there was more space for other topics. As we will see in the following chapters, common ground emerged in areas such as the female body, motherhood, child rearing, education, and values. In addition, because I was an outsider the young women considered me knowledgeable in duniyavi or worldly matters. As a consequence, the teachers and students often asked me questions regarding anything and everything about life in other countries, family structure, and religion. Sometimes, one or the other of the young women approached me with a written question, usually of a more intimate content, such as questions related to contraceptives, which seemed to be a topic of great concern, although never in public. Some of the married teachers seemed especially concerned about child spacing, as they told me that they did not want to become pregnant (again) too soon. Even though ‘officially’ practices related to contraception and ‘family planning’ were considered forbidden in this community, the complexity of the young women’s lives often made them aware of the necessity to interfere with what was otherwise referred to as God’s will. Practical as they were, the young women knew how difficult it would be to provide good education for many children these days and how frequent child bearing could wear out the mother. Moreover, as the young women were proud of and loved their work as teachers in the Madrasatul Niswan, they also showed concern for their professional status. Only the Principal appeared to form an exception, as she had already experienced numerous pregnancies. In general, questions related to contraceptives and child spacing pointed to an intriguing interweaving of principles dictated by belief and ideas introduced through the young women’s access to information, which is a point that will return in Chapter 5.

Sharing time and space over a long period of time allowed for common ground to emerge, as a result of which both sides changed. While above I described some of the changes I observed in the young women I met in the madrasa, it deserves mention that I changed as well. During the early stages of my fieldwork I mostly felt inadequate. The young women seemed to derive self-esteem and peace of mind from their daily routine consisting of studies, set times for ablutions, prayers, and Quran recitations. By contrast, I was generally shaken by the time I arrived in the madrasa. The environment often made an overwhelming impression on my daily walks
to the madrasa, as there were always the ill, the beggars, the dirt, and the butcher shops. Generally I tended to cover my head when walking through the area, but once I had small stones thrown at me by young Hindu boys who thought I was a foreign convert to Islam. When I left my head uncovered the Muslim shopkeepers hissed at me or passed snide remarks, because I was not dressed ‘properly’. After all, I walked the area almost every day for months at a stretch, and they knew I went to the madrasa. In their opinion I probably should have known how a decent woman ought to dress. Owing to the above impressions I tended to feel at a loss most of the time, not knowing what to do in order to feel more at ease.

Finding an alternative route to reach the madrasa helped to some extent, as it allowed me to avoid some of the emotional turmoil caused by the surroundings. However, difficulties still seemed to continue inside the madrasa. At first the feeling of being inadequate made me try to go out of my way to adjust, at least in terms of outside markers such as dress. I avoided wearing jewellery, which the young women interpreted in a different manner, because they thought me extremely unfortunate for not possessing any gold. In addition, I consciously dressed ‘down’. In other words, I chose inconspicuous colours for my plain cotton suits and made sure that my head and chest were covered at all times. Despite all efforts I continued to feel physically out of place, as I was too tall for the low ceilings and everyone else seemed to be much shorter than me. In addition, my dupatta or scarf that was supposed to cover my head, shoulders, and chest never seemed to be long enough either. Although later on I was relieved to see that the dupattas also slipped off the teachers’ and students’ heads at times, the situation really began to improve once I stopped trying so hard to adjust. The more I ‘became’ myself again in this setting, the more I eased into the situation, and the more perceptive I was with a view to what was going on around me. The above process also made me more reflective regarding the culturally determined aspects of my identity, what roles I assume, and what roles are assigned to me. I had to struggle to overcome my initial resistance when visiting girls’ madrasas in the Old City of Delhi and in Nizamuddin, as it took time to appreciate the finer details of those places, such as the remainders of beautiful architecture, but above all it was the people who turned the initial challenge into an experience I could appreciate.
3.3 The ‘men behind the curtain’

The Founder was among the first people I met in the madrasa. He was a Deobandi graduate from Ansari\(^5\) background, who came from the Barabanki district close to Lucknow. He established the Madrasatul Niswan in 1996 to ‘improve the personal life of the students,’ with the aim of increasing religious consciousness, and with a view to creating equality in terms of access to religious knowledge for young Muslim women. In terms of his professional background, the Maulana was a trained Arabic teacher who continued teaching Arabic at the Kashful Ulum Madrasa for boys in the Tablighi Markaz or Centre, and his profession, in fact, had brought him and his family to Delhi. In the girls’ madrasa, setting the curriculum was one of his foremost tasks and responsibilities. He once told me that ‘the mother’s lap is the first madrasa,’ which was a common statement that reminds of similar arguments made by the late nineteenth century reformers, who also ascribed great importance to training young women in Islamic matters with a view to turning them into more competent wives and mothers. The Maulana’s argument took on a different direction, however, as he claimed that in theory there was nothing objectionable about women taking up a profession, as long as their professional life did not conflict with the requirements of purdah. He explained that the shariah permits women to work as long as she wears a burqa and works in a gender segregated environment. But he also made clear that in his opinion employment opportunities were less important than the strive for personal reform.

The Maulana was also the father of the Principal, who in turn married the madrasa’s Manager or nazim, whom I will introduce now. Like the Maulana, the Nazim-e-Jamia or Manager claimed Ansari background, and besides being the Founder’s son-in-law and the Principal’s husband, the younger Maulana was also distantly related with the founders of the Jamiatu’s Salehat in Malegaon.\(^6\) However, neither he nor his wife were able to recall the exact line of relatedness between their families. Unlike his father-in-law who studied in Deoband, the Manager received his secondary education at the Kashful Ulum Madrasa, run by the Tablighi Jamaat in the Nizamuddin Markaz, where he graduated in 1988. Following his graduation he did tablighi work for one and a half years, and during the same period he co-authored a commentary on the Hayat-us-Sahaba (History of the Companions of the Prophet) with his father-in-law.\(^7\) In keeping with the views of his father-in-law, the Manager stated that the madrasa’s educational aim was the improvement of Muslim women’s ‘personal life.’ Even though employment opportunities again ranked second in his argument, he nevertheless pointed out that according to the shariah there was nothing wrong with a woman working in
the public sector, as long as she observed purdah by covering her body and by ensuring that her workspace remained outside the scope of unrelated men.

The Manager explained that only ten percent out of the approximately one hundred and eighty young women were ‘local’ students, by which he referred to the girls living in the immediate surroundings of the madrasa, adding that all the students come from ‘poor to lower middle-class families’. He emphasized that not all of them were Ansaris, as the students’ social background appeared to cut across castes. Most girls were from lower castes, and many of them got married at a young age. In fact, many were already married prior to enrolment in the Madrasat-ul Niswan, but the Maulana said that he intended for such malpractices to stop in the near future, because these ‘early marriages’ led to many problems, such as students’ prolonged stays at home. Strikingly enough, pregnancies were not mentioned in this respect and during my fieldwork I did not witness cases of pregnancies among the married students either. The Manager also pointed out that other students and teachers remained unmarried longer than their peers. This observation indicates that the level of education may represent a problem for some of the young women when trying to find a suitable spouse, while for others their studies formed an acceptable excuse to postpone marriage.

According to both Maulanas, the madrasa had turned out to be a success so far, because even though the Madrasat-ul Niswan is mainly promoted by word of mouth, parents come to the madrasa ‘like customers come to a shop’. In their opinion, it is the quality of education that makes the madrasa so popular. The Manager explained that the curriculum is based on the dars-e-nizami, be it in an adjusted form to fit the shorter duration of the course. Due to the extensive language classes in Urdu and Arabic, the course was meant to take six years initially, but according to the Manager ‘clever’ girls should be able to complete the course in five-years. While in his words the average graduation age ranged between eighteen and twenty two, my findings indicate that the recent batches of graduates were considerably younger than that, namely between fifteen and sixteen years of age.

Regarding the extent to which the contentious duniyavi or non-Islamic subjects are implemented in the Madrasat-ul Niswan, the official curriculum includes maths, Hindi, science, and English. However, my observations did not confirm that apart from English any of the above subjects were actually taught. When I asked the teachers about this divergence, the Principal replied that as for now they lacked sufficiently trained staff to teach the above subjects. As often madrasa teachers have had little to no exposure to
non-Islamic forms of education and training, the above-mentioned problem is of common concern. In the Madrasatul Niswan, the students are expected to have attended government schools up to class VII, which also serves as a justification why there is no need to teach more non-Islamic subjects. After all, the students should have had some exposure to non-Islamic education prior to their studies in a madrasa. By the same token, they were encouraged to pursue their studies after graduation in government colleges and universities. However, again my data indicate that most of the students and teachers did not have much or even any exposure to non-Islamic forms of education prior to enrolment in the Madrasatul Niswan.

One possible explanation is that the madrasa has only been operating for a few years, owing to which they might have needed all the students they could get initially. By now, those in charge of running the madrasa may have become more selective regarding the students' educational and social background, as the teachers in particular often complained about the students' lack of adab or manners, which they blamed on their 'poor' background. A second explanation is that those in charge would like to make their own example the rule. As I will show in the following section, the Founder, the Manager, the Principal, and those belonging to the 'core families' adhered to the view that it was desirable for girls below the age of purdah to receive the best (non-Islamic) education possible.

3.4 A relatively closed community?

While most of the current teachers and students had little to no exposure to non-Islamic education prior to their studies in girls' madrasas, it turned out that badi appa's' young daughters attended the Delhi Public School, together with another girl from the 'core families'. The Delhi Public School represents one of the more prestigious schools in Delhi and hence I wondered how the Manager could afford the monthly school fees for his daughters. Moreover, the families would have needed certain 'contacts' in order to get their daughters admitted to such a middle- to upper-middle-class public school. The above conditions did not seem to tally with the overall impression I got of the circumstances the families lived under, even more so as the Principal badi appa vented frequent complaints regarding the lack of adequate financial resources to meet various ends.

The riddle was solved when I found out that the school in question ran two daily shifts. The first was the English medium morning shift, for which high monthly fees had to be paid, while the second shift in Hindi started
past noon and was free of charge. Although the school uniform and the classrooms were the same, the teachers were different, and the classes were free of cost. Aware of the above divide, badi appa requested me on many occasions to speak to the Delhi Public School’s Principal on her behalf and ask whether the high fees for the English morning classes could be waived in the case of ‘poor people from the madrasa,’ as badi appa formulated it. She also urged me to make further enquiries in order to find out ‘how the school system works in India,’ which was a statement that puzzled me on two accounts. To begin with, this learned young woman did not seem to be familiar at all with the non-Islamic school system of her own country. In addition, it struck me how much she and her husband would have liked for their daughters to continue their education in an English medium school prior to reaching the age of purdah.

When I asked badi appa and some of the other teachers why they wanted for their daughters to receive English medium education and why they preferred for them to attend the Delhi Public School, they unanimously said that these days ‘we think that it is good for girls to get as much education as possible prior to reaching the age of purdah,’ which is to say prior to puberty. While girls below that age should have as much exposure to non-Islamic or duniyavi subjects as possible, from puberty onwards they ‘have time enough’ to dedicate themselves exclusively to religious studies. The suggested educational trajectory represents an alternative to the ‘dual type’ madrasa, wherein the state curriculum is taught alongside Islamic subjects. What the teachers suggested was a combination of education in duniyavi or non-Islamic subjects and din or faith in stages divided by the marker of puberty.

Despite the alternative educational model that makes it possible for the generation of badi appa’s daughters to receive more non-Islamic education, I realized that neither the Founder, nor the ‘core families,’ teaching staff, or students for that matter seemed to have much experience with the non-Islamic education system in India, as they had by and large received their education in makatib, madrasas, vocational training centres, and primary (Urdu medium) Islamic schools. As a result, badi appa was once again surprised to hear that there were also English medium (government) schools that were free of charge. The issue of non-Islamic forms of education indicated how relatively closed the Madrasatul Niswan’s community is, how little the young women appeared to be aware of what was going on in their immediate (non-Muslim) surroundings, and how little orientation they possessed in navigating the non-Muslim administration of their own country.
By contrast, the young women were very much aware of what was going on in the rest of the 'Muslim World'. One day, two women from the neighbourhood, who were acquainted with one of the teachers belonging to the 'core families', came to the staff room just before the Thursday Programme was about to start. The elderly women, whose teeth and gums were reddened owing to their habit of chewing aracea nuts or pan, made themselves comfortable among the teachers and started to discuss politics with them. As the pending war on Iraq worried the women at the time, they asked badi appa to incorporate prayers for peace in the Thursday Programme. They added with agitated voices that war always hurts the *chhote log* or 'small people', adding that they were unable to do anything to stop this war, as Muslims were but a minority in India.

Similarly, once I asked the Manager's opinion regarding the ongoing anti-madrasa propaganda, and he replied in somewhat cryptic imagery that 'those people' (non-Muslims) were in power and that 'he who wields the stick can control the buffalo', adding that 'those who are not willing to listen to us know it is day, but they say it is night'. He explained that while their Hindu neighbours were on friendly terms with them, as they witnessed every day that they did not do anything wrong in the madrasa, the 'high class' that did not interact with Muslims was to blame for creating misconceptions. My observations confirmed that the Hindus living next to the madrasa were on friendly terms with their neighbours. One day, on my way to the madrasa, the women sitting outside the small house, which was a scene that stood in striking contrast with the strict purdah observed right next door, greeted me with a polite namaskar and invited me to join them for a while. The women, who were roughly between seven and seventy years of age, asked if I was a student 'there', and they nodded their heads in the direction of the madrasa. When I affirmed, explaining that I was doing research 'there', they smiled and said they were proud to have such a 'good school' right next door.

On another occasion the Manager and I talked about the Delhi government's effort to establish a Central Madrasa Board. His friend, a Deobandi graduate, explained that there was a Madrasa Board in his home state Bihar, where the government paid madrasa staff for teaching non-Islamic subjects in the affiliated local madrasas. Although the teaching of duniyavi or non-Islamic subjects did not have a negative impact on the quality of teaching in the madrasas per se, the practice of cooperating with the government resembled begging in his opinion, which represented a blameworthy act. The Manager disagreed with the idea of a Central Madrasa Board altogether.
He thought government help was no good, because the teachers’ salaries would no longer be paid by the community, but by the non-Muslim government. In addition, in his opinion the interference on the part of the government would have a negative influence on the *dini talim* or religious education. He added that it was nevertheless in accordance with the shariah to accept money from a non-Muslim government. By way of conclusion he suggested that a madrasa did not have to teach duniyavi or non-Islamic subjects, since the students were expected to be familiar with non-Islamic subjects, and following their studies they could seek admission in universities.

The above indicates that the Madrasatul Niswan was founded within a milieu of lower caste Muslims from outside Delhi. Moreover, the Founder’s and Manager’s views indicate that although the Madrasatul Niswan represents an institution with relatively closed community structures and a certain disregard for worldly matters, what is going on in the political domain does not leave those inside untouched. Finally, the families of the Founder, Manager, and the ‘core families’ were linked through their association with the lay preachers’ movement known as the Tablighi Jamaat.

3.5 **The ‘core families’ and the Tablighi Jamaat**

Conversations with the Founder, Manager, and the Principal, brought to the fore that they were part of a network that linked them with a number of other families in basti Nizamuddin through common areas of origin, caste, and their active involvement in the Tablighi Jamaat⁹. To begin with, it struck me that two of the fourteen teachers were maternal cousins and that their female siblings above the age of purdah studied in the Madrasatul Niswan. Moreover, the cousins’ fathers came from the same Barabanki district close to Lucknow as the Founder. Finally, like the Manager, the two fathers had studied in the Kashful Ulum Madrasa for boys in Nizamuddin, a madrasa established by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, the founder of the Tablighi Jamaat. In short, the three families appeared to form the backbone for a lot of activities in the girls’ madrasa, such as taking turns looking after daily affairs and setting the curriculum. In addition, the men were all actively involved in doing tablighi work, and the cousins’ fathers taught in the Kashful Ulum Madrasa for boys like the Founder. Apart from kinship, the shared worldview influenced by their affiliation with the Tablighi Jamaat appeared to have brought together this group of men, and bonds between the families were maintained, reinforced, and extended through arranged marriages between children of the ‘core families’.
The 'core families' also played a crucial role at a broader level, as it was through family ties that an active exchange of teachers and students was facilitated between the Madrasatul Niswan, the Jamia Noorul Islam in Lucknow, and the Jamiatu Salehat in Malegaon. Exchanges between the three girls' madrasas in turn ensured the reproduction of the above networks, as for example a young teacher who had graduated from the Jamia Noorul Islam prepared to marry the younger brother of a teacher who had studied in the Jamiatu Salehat. In the Madrasatul Niswan, teachers and students were mainly recruited through family ties and tablighi work, and similarly international contacts too were maintained through the tablighi work of the Founder and Manager. Both used to travel all over the country and beyond on a regular basis, also to raise funds for the madrasa. Many students from places outside Delhi told me that they had come to know about the Madrasatul Niswan through the travelling men associated with it.

The above observations hint at how the Tablighi Jamaat appeared time again in the course of my fieldwork, both in conversations and physically. As for the latter, the organization's headquarters referred to as Centre or Markaz earlier were located in the direct vicinity of the Madrasatul Niswan. On my daily walks to and from the madrasa, I observed some of the activities going on in that part of basti Nizamuddin, such as the arrival of overseas delegations, the departure of local delegations of tablighi activists, preparations for major meetings, and the like. Moreover, the many cassette tape sellers and petty trade people affiliated with the Tablighi Jamaat often proved to be important sources of information, both with regard to the Tablighi Jamaat's activities and with regard to the background of the Madrasatul Niswan.

During my search for literature on madrasa education, I found the bookshops of Nizamuddin most helpful. The bookshops in front of the Tablighi Markaz sold the theological books studied in the nearby Madrasatul Niswan off the shelf. Besides, numerous treatises for women or addressing the issue of women in relation to various contemporary subjects were available as well (see Chapter 4). From late 2001 onwards, it seemed as if more of these small booklets were stocked, the print quality was better, and often English or French translations were available as well. Links between the Madrasatul Niswan and the Tablighi Jamaat involve a third party, namely the Nadwatul Ulama in Lucknow. With regard to the latter it deserves mention once more that the Madrasatul Niswan was founded under the patronage of the Nadwatul Ulama, which intended to represent the middle path between the Deoband and Aligarh. In addition, some of its graduates, such as the afore mentioned Saiyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, joined the Tablighi Jamaat later on.
Conversations with students and teachers in the Madrasatul Niswan suggested that many of their male family members, such as husbands, fathers, brothers, cousins, or uncles were active in the Tablighi Jamaat or taught in the Kashful Ulum Madrasa for boys in the nearby Tablighi Markaz. Generally, whenever the students and teachers spoke about their male relatives’ tablighi activities, such as the regular travelling ‘in the path of God’, they did so with admiration. At times their admiration was paired with a tinge of envy, as their male relatives’ lives appeared to symbolize the mobility, freedom, and excitement some of them seemed to miss. The young women appreciated their relatives’ tablighi activities, as on many occasions they expressed regret that owing to their observance of a very strict form of purdah activities such as ‘travelling in the path of God’ were beyond their possibilities. Still, the madrasa’s curriculum prescribed the Tablighi Jamaat’s core piece of literature or ‘manual’, namely the Fazail-e-Amal (Virtues of Everyday Actions), for daily reading all throughout the five-year course. Apart from learning about virtues, the girls were also trained in the tablighi style of dawah, which the students practised on me frequently, as we saw before.

The Tablighi Jamaat and the Madrasatul Niswan represent social structures that set them apart from their immediate surroundings, for example due to their disregard for the lavishness associated with weddings and due to what Metcalf refers to as the (temporary) inversion of gender roles in the case of the Tablighi Jamaat activists (Metcalf 2000). Concerning the inversion of gender roles, it is noteworthy that men prepared the food for the students and teachers in the Madrasatul Niswan, while the women in turn were merely in charge of cleaning the school building and of washing their clothes, as men were not allowed to enter the madrasa. Keeping in mind the limitations of the concept, according to Metcalf such an inversion of gender roles can be observed in the case of the Tablighi Jamaat too, as the men who ‘travel in the path of God’ are left to their own devices in terms of looking after their daily needs for the duration of their journey.

With regard to weddings, the students and teachers in the Madrasatul Niswan voiced a distinct contempt for the lavishness associated with them. Although in India weddings are generally seen as opportunities for displaying wealth, in the case of the Tablighi Jamaat and the Madrasatul Niswan opulent wedding celebrations are condemned for representing unnecessary and even blameworthy luxury. The community’s attitude regarding weddings has a bearing on the identity of the young women in the Madrasatul Niswan, as for example dowry and the otherwise often feared role of the new bahu or daughter-in-law seemed to be lesser concerns within this com-
munity. After all, at least in theory marriage was perceived as yet another pious act to be carried out in all its simplicity. Still, many students and teachers loved to talk about the gifts they expected or had been given, while the Principal in turn tended to reprimand them for indulging in worldly desires, such as wishing to receive beautiful gold rings, as wearing jewellery and fancy dresses were supposed to be frowned upon.

In line with the community's worldview, it seemed as if nothing was supposed to create unnecessary divides among the students. Equality was emphasized with regard to the obligation to pursue knowledge for men and women, with regard to justifying the sameness of the curriculum in the girls' madrasa, and finally also with regard to observing purdah. The latter implies that unlike the more common interpretation that defines purdah exclusively as female segregation and modest dress, here the concept is interpreted to denote modesty in dress and behaviour for men and women alike. Equality was also promoted among the students by ensuring that all of them wore the same plain white trousers, long blouses, and white headscarves inside the madrasa and refrained from donning any jewellery. However, despite the strong emphasis on equality there were exceptions, because the girls developed strategies that allowed them to show their individuality within the given constraints through very subtle means. For example, the young women adorned their hands and feet with floral mehendi or henna designs, or they decorated their simple white blouses and trousers with hand painted floral patterns, at times they chose finer materials for their dresses than plain cotton, or they wore jewellery after marriage and justified it as their husband's wish, which could not be denied.

In addition to the emphasis on equality, the Madrasatul Niswan and the Tablighi Jamaat seek to create a milieu characterized by deep piety. In the case of the Tablighi Jamaat this becomes evident in the Fazail-e-Amal, wherein the processes of sanctifying everyday life and its actions are laid out in minute detail. The manual's basic teaching is that certain virtues associated with daily behaviour are valuable for the accumulation of religious merit (sawab) for the Hereafter. One of the Fazail's main teachings, namely that one should abstain from futile things, also seemed to play an important role for the everyday life in the Madrasatul Niswan. The students and teachers were rarely ever found with idle hands, because everyone seemed to be occupied doing something or the other, such as studying, reading, handiwork, or chores, at all times. Since the meaning of these observations will be discussed in the following chapter in relation to the concept of the 'total institution,' suffice it to note here that without holding virtues such as abstaining from futile things in high regard, the Madrasatul
Niswa would not be able to operate under the present circumstances, considering that space is very limited.

While linkages between the Madrasatul Niswa and the Tablighi Jamaat were obvious at the informal level, at the formal level such a linkage remains questionable, because the Tablighi Jamaat is known to oppose any formal association with educational institutions, let alone with a girls' madrasa. Trying to gain a better understanding of the Tablighi Jamaat's position regarding women and education, I came across a publication titled *Women in the Field of Education* (Yunus 1994) in one of the tablighi bookshops opposite the Centre or Markaz. Herein, the author defines tabligh (preaching) as an action based on the Prophet's call to faith (dawah) and the efforts adopted by the Companions (Sahaba), carried out with the aim of reviving faith (din) and Prophet's practice (sunnah) among the believers, out of a perceived need for self reformation (Yunus 1994:3-5). Reminding of similar arguments made by the late nineteenth century reformers, especially women are thought to be in need of self reformation, as they are found guilty of perpetuating un-Islamic customs associated with household rituals, while representing the source of guidance for future generations at the same time. The following quote indicates how seriously the task of educating and reforming women is taken: 'Failing to do this the women and their innocent offspring will be washed away in a flood of irreligiousness, and ruin their worldly and next lives' (Yunus 1994:13). In other words, if a child turns toward 'evil,' then evil will reign, because of the parents' failure to provide an Islamic upbringing for the child. Evils that harm children and thereby also society at large include novels and fictitious books, theatre, cinema, television, and fashion (Yunus 1994:19-20). Consequently, women are obliged to know questions pertaining to Islamic law (masail) and to seek knowledge about creation and law (Yunus 1994:23, 52).

Characteristic of the tablighi views regarding women's education is the idealization of past role models combined with anxieties regarding new methods of teaching and new areas of studies. Because women are seen as equal to man with regard to acquiring the rewards of matters pertaining to faith, if a woman 'wishes' to acquire knowledge, purdah should not be a hindrance. Furthermore, a select few should pursue higher education so as to guide others with a view to reviving the Prophet's practice (sunnah) of the first century of Islam. The suggested method of teaching entails that ulama teach women at home 'from behind a curtain,' and those women in turn should teach other women in their locality. The underlying motivation for acquiring knowledge is 'to perfect one's life internally and externally,'
while knowledge should also enable a person to earn a halal livelihood. In the proposed educational model Islamic knowledge (ilm-e-din) represents a means of earning rewards (sawab) for the Hereafter. The author's concluding advice is to promote home teaching for women, for which he explicitly recommends Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's afore mentioned Bihishti Zewar (Heavenly Ornaments; Yunus 1994:53-55, 58). In addition, women's self-reformation is to be effected through weekly religious (dini) programmes for women, for example, which should include the following elements:

- weekly educational meetings (talim)
- reminders to perform prayers (salat) regularly
- reminders regarding punctuality in counting rosaries (tasbihat)
- encouragement to study books on virtues (fazail)
- constructive approach toward raising children
- encouragement to make an effort to send men out in the path of God (Yunus 1994:3-6)

In line with the above suggestion regarding the organization of weekly religious programmes for women, every Thursday afternoon a lecture (bayan) is held at the Tablighi Markaz exclusively for women. Many of the teachers in the Madrasatul Niswan's attend the lectures regularly, which a learned man holds from behind a curtain. As the teachers pointed out on many occasions, for them the weekly meetings were a source of inspiration, because they learned something new. In addition, the short trips to the Tablighi Markaz also meant occasions for brief but regular outings, which all of the young women appreciated since such opportunities were rare otherwise.

In the Madrasatul Niswan, similar weekly meetings or jamaats were organized for the students, their female family members, and for women from the neighbourhood, on Thursdays around noon. The Thursday Programme generally consisted of recitations from the Quran, traditions of the Prophet (ahadith), prayer (namaz), religious poetry in Urdu (naat), exegesis (tafsir), Islamic law (fiqh), value oriented literature (adab), and finally also the students' own poems (naat) and anthems (taranas) in praise of the madrasa. The poems and songs referred to as naat and taranas respectively appeared to constitute one of the few socially accepted means for emotional expression. Besides, the sung poems and anthems represented the only forms of music allowed in the Madrasatul Niswan.

When I asked the teachers how the students learned to sing the anthems, they replied that tapes were readily available in the nearby Tablighi Markaz.
On another occasion, the students showed me their notebooks, wherein they had written down the poems and anthems. I saw that sometimes the Urdu and Arabic words were written in beautiful calligraphy, while other poems appeared to be merely scribbled down. When I tried to find out more about the difference, the young women told me that apart from reproducing lyrics and tunes from tapes, they also liked to copy tunes for lyrics they had written in praise of Islam, the Prophet, and the madrasa. The students either learned to sing the anthems from the tapes directly, or one of the teachers sat down with a student in the staff room adjusting the student's composition to fit the tune. The student in turn repeated each line while writing down the words, sometimes adding marks that indicated the correct intonation and the rhythmical rise and fall of the voice. Apart from the well known Urdu poems and the readily available anthems, some of the melodies I heard the students sing during the Thursday Programme reminded of popular Hindi *filmi* tunes. Although according to the worldview of this Muslim community watching movies was considered forbidden as well, not being exposed to the latest Bollywood songs at all seems almost impossible in any Indian setting. Although the madrasa appeared to be relatively secluded, the catchy tunes that cut across lines of religion, class, and caste tend to permeate every small market or bazaar.

Every Thursday the Programme was held following the morning teaching session, roughly between 11:30am and 2pm. After a quick lunch, the students, teachers, and women from the neighbourhood including the teachers' and students' relatives gathered in the largest section of the building, which was the ground floor. Approximately two hundred attendants could be seated on the floor and on the open upstairs gallery in orderly rows supervised by senior students. Once everyone had taken place, first the teachers in charge of organizing the Programme that day used to enter the tiny hall and proceeded to the very front, where they sat down facing everyone else from a slightly elevated section of the hall. With the handwritten programme for the day in hand, they took turns announcing the students' contributions through the microphone. The technical equipment was located in the front room, where the Manager usually sat with his guests and listened to what was going on behind the door that separated them from the girls.

As the Thursday Programme was held in Urdu and Arabic, the latter was translated into Urdu for those not familiar with the language. While for the young women belonging to the 'core families', knowledge of 'true Islam' was associated with the mastery of Arabic, for the majority of lower-caste rural stu-
students, Arabic merely represented another tough subject they had to master. While the Quran was recited in Arabic, the exegesis of a Quranic text (tafsir) took place in Urdu, in a contrastingly familiar tone and merged with numerous moral appeals to the audience fashioned in the style of the value oriented adab literature, which will be examined in the following chapter. At the teachers’ request, students came to the fore and presented their contribution to the meeting. In the meantime, the teachers often called other students to the fore as well to reprimand them for performing poorly during the past week. To summarize the weekly event, for the students it meant an occasion to demonstrate their skills, while for the teachers it seemed to be a routine that entailed an occasion for public disciplining. For those who came to listen from outside, the Thursday Programme with its diverse contributions was an opportunity to learn something about Islam and to be reminded of one’s moral obligations, which appeared to be the primary aim of the weekly meetings.

The above findings indicate that once the initial difficulties related to access were overcome, it turned out that the Madrasatul Niswa was established in a particular intellectual milieu of lower caste Muslims from outside Delhi. In addition, the informal association of the men in charge with the Tablighi Jamaat and its particular views regarding women and education appeared to have a significant bearing on the educational ideas underlying the madrassa’s curriculum and on the worldview of the people involved. As we will see in the following chapter, the educational views of the men in charge of running the Madrasatul Niswa did not always coincide with what was actually taught inside the madrasa. Although they claimed that the standardized madrasa curriculum for boys (dars-e-nizami) had merely been adjusted to fit the shorter duration of the course for girls, my observations suggest that the ‘adjustments’ were made in line with a particular understanding of Islamic womanhood.
1. See also 'Visiting a Women's Madrasa in Southern India,' ISIM Newsletter 7 (April 2001), 14; revised German version: 'Besuch einer Frauen-Madrasa in Südinindien' at: http://www.meome.de/app/de/artcont_portal_news_article.jsp/70796.html.

2. To provide a brief background to the three organizations mentioned: The Jamaat-e-Islami-e-Hind is a political party founded prior to Partition in 1941 in Lahore (now Pakistan) and ideologically it draws on Maududi (see also Grare 2001). The Jamaat-e-Ulama-e-Hind is an organization of Indian Muslim scholars mainly associated with Deoband, and among the organization's publications is Al-Jamiyat, quoted in Chapters 2 and 4. The All India Muslim Personal Law Board came to be in post-Partition India, wherein the constitutional 'minority rights' granted freedom of religion, based on which Muslims have since maintained their own 'personal law' in line with the shariah. The All India Muslim Personal Law Board in turn was established to protect the Indian 'Muslim personal law' from attempts at reform on the part of the (changing) non-Muslim governments. The Milli Gazette is a Delhi-based Muslim newspaper published in English.

3. The significance of the phrase *subhan allah* has been explained using the following hadith: Sad bin Abu Waqqa said: Once when we were with God's messenger he asked whether any of us was incapable of acquiring a thousand blessings daily, and when one of those sitting with him asked how any of them could acquire a thousand blessings he replied, 'If he says Glory be to God (Subhan Allah) a hundred times, a thousand blessings will be recorded for him or a thousand sins will be removed from him.' J. Robson, 'The reward for glorifying, praising, declaring God's unity and His greatness,' in: God's Names, Book X, Mishkat-al-Masabih, vol. I, 486-487. Source: http://salmanspiritual.com/four_prayers.html.

4. Keeping in mind an earlier remark about the *radd* texts in the previous chapter (n. 12), it deserves mention that the students' attempts at converting me are understandable when taking into account what they thought to know about my cultural background. Apparently, they sincerely meant to save me from the depravity of the 'West'.

5. The claim to Ansari descent can mean two things: (a) the claim to descent from the Ansars or Helpers who welcomed the Prophet and his followers in Medina; and (b) reference to the convert (lower) caste of the weavers known as Ansaris in north India.

6. My findings suggest that the Jamiatu'l Salehat in Malegaon is the oldest and largest girls' in post-Partition India, as it was founded in the early 1950s.

7. The *Hayat-us-Sahaba*, which is included in the Madrasatul Niswan's curriculum, was compiled by Maulana Muhammad Yusuf, son of Maulana Muhammad Ilyas and the Tablighi Jamaat's second Amir. See Muhammad Khalid Masud 2000,12-13 on the question of Maulana Ilyas' succession by his son Maulana Yusuf.

8. *Pan* refers to a variety of betel nut preparations, known to have a mildly sedative effect. Although smoking tobacco and chewing *pan* are considered vices by many Muslims, apparently the two women indulged in chewing the dried betel nut variety quite frequently.
9. Masud mentions that the meaning of tabligh underwent changes, since the term assumed its present meaning of 'preaching' only against the background of Hindu and Christian missionary activities (Masud 2000:21). Although some of the young women in the Madrasatul Niswan expressed a certain resentment vis-à-vis Sufism and the popular practices associated with the shrines, the Tabligh Jamaat's founder Ilyas fostered Sufi inclinations, although he was more of a reformer than a Sufi (Masud 2000:40). In line with the reformist ideal, the initial aim of the Tablighi Jamaat was the 'adoption of learning, teaching, serving and promoting religion as a way of life' (Masud 2000:11), thereby sanctifying everyday life and actions.

10. I am grateful to Khalid Masud for pointing out that the networks between the 'core families' resemble a modern version of an Islamic institution referred to as wala. The Arabic 'al-wala' means 'support, love, help', and its legal meaning is to fully agree with the sayings, beliefs, and deeds that please God and the persons He likes. In other words, 'it is the foundation by which all relationships and dealings in a Muslim community are built [...]'; and 'it is the most powerful relationship that links between people' (http://islam.org.au/articles/20/tafseer1.htm). A point of contestation is whether this principle holds true exclusively for Muslims or may include non-Muslims as well.

11. The present Aligarh Muslim University was founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (b. 1817 in Delhi) in 1875 under the name of Aligarh Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College. The college was meant to represent a 'bridge between the old and the new, the East and the West'. For further information, see http://www.amu.ac.in.

12. Among this particular group of Muslim women, purdah includes wearing the ankle length manteau known as burqa, the face veil or niqab, thick socks up to their knees, and long black gloves reaching above the elbows, whenever they leave the madrasa and whenever they venture outside their homes, also in the scorching heat of summer in Delhi. Rather than complaining about it, the girls seemed to take pride in what they perceived as a particularly strict form of purdah.

13. Dowry, i.e. the gifts that come with the girl from her parental home, is used here as a term to be distinguished from the 'official' mahr and the customary exchange of gifts between the families.

14. This definition reminds of Maududi's elaborations on purdah in his Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam (Maududi 1973). His approach to the question of gender meant that 'history is re-read through the glasses of moral depravity' with at the core of the problem being 'woman' (Maududi 1973:23, 13). In line with this diagnosis, Maududi argued in favour of two distinct and separate spheres for men and women: the male being the active working sphere and the female being fulfilled by motherhood and her ensuing 'passive role in life' (Maududi 1973:153-155).
15. See also the students' pledge in the Madrasatul Niswan's admission papers: 'I promise that I shall observe these rules and regulations and that I shall study with great dedication and that I shall stay away from those things that are a waste of time and that I shall never display any immoral behaviour. I promise that I shall dedicate 24 hours a day to studies in accordance with the timetable of the Jamia and that I shall obey the command of those in charge of the Jamia and accept any punishment if I break any of the rules and regulations.' (see Appendix I).

16. Prior to attending the weekly Thursday Programme in the Madrasatul Niswan for the first time, I heard of similar activities in smaller girls' madrasas in Shahjahanpur or Old Delhi and Okhla, where meetings for women were also organized on Thursdays and Fridays.

17. It deserves mention that there is a tradition of anthems (taranas) being composed in praise of Islamic institutions of learning, as for example Aligarh Muslim University and the Jamia Millia Islamia each have their own taranas or anthems (see e.g. http://www.amu.ac.in/tarana.htm and http://jmi.nic.in/jamiatarana.htm). I am grateful to Khalid Masud who suggested that it was probably the British who introduced the taranas in Islamic institutions of learning, thereby encouraging the development of loyalty to one particular school.

18. Besides the religious taranas and the influence of popular filmi songs, a third genre reminded of the old fashioned European 'kitchen songs' about 'fallen girls'. One day a teacher sang a song in which a married girl went to the cinema, worrying about what her husband and parents-in-law would say once she returned home. However, the temptation of seeing the film weighed stronger than her conscience. Once she entered the cinema hall, her glass bangles [the sign of a married woman, M.W.] broke, leaving her to wonder how to explain this to her husband in addition to her absence. Upon returning to her marital home late at night, her husband opened the door and immediately noticed the missing bangles, which she was unable to explain, and she felt ashamed vis-à-vis her suspicious husband and in-laws. According to the teachers, this song was common knowledge for girls and hence it was not considered forbidden, despite being non-religious, as it appeared to fall under a sort of 'advice song' genre for young women.