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

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5 Female authority and the public

'Many women acquired Deeni knowledge [i.e. knowledge pertaining to faith, M.W.] from great Muhadditheen [narrators of Prophetic traditions, M.W.] from behind the curtain, and they in turn taught these sciences to other men from behind the curtain.' (Yunus 1994:58)

After examining the educational programme of the Madrasatul Niswan, this chapter addresses the question whether female authority in Islamic matters is emerging in girls’ madrasas. My findings suggest that the students’ identity as Muslim women, along with the demands laid out by the concept of purdah or gender segregation, are factors that influence their professional choices as well as their ability to participate in the public. With a view to finding answers to the above question the following sections examine the linkages between gender, the nexus between agency and discipline, and forms of public presence.

5.1 Life after graduation

When I began fieldwork in the Madrasatul Niswan in late 2001, rumour had it that a vast plot of land had been acquired in another predominantly Muslim locality called Okhla, where also the Jamiatul Zehra introduced in the previous chapter and the Jamia Millia Islamia University are located. Another rumour had it that the entire Madrasatul Niswan was to shift by mid 2002, but once the moment had arrived, it turned out that construction work had progressed to such a limited extent that only the nursery section was to commence its teaching activities for the youngest in Okhla. Two senior teachers in their mid twenties were delegated from the Madrasatul Niswan in Nizamuddin to set up the nursery unit in Okhla, which prior to the teachers’ departure I had not been aware of. Apart from occasional tutorials for young children and despite the curriculum’s claim that the madrasa provides education for various age groups (see Appendix II), what is taught in practice is the five-year secondary course for girls from roughly twelve years onwards. Nevertheless, the plans for expansion also seemed to include an extended outreach through the introduction of formalized primary education.
As only two of the teachers had taken up teaching the youngest in Okhla and not everyone had seen the new site to begin with, for those who stayed behind in Nizamuddin the Okhla madrasa almost acquired the status of an ideal myth. Adding to this impression were circumstances ensuring that whenever I wanted to go to Okhla to see the new compound, the route description and address were too vague to be of practical use. Later on it occurred to me that the girls were probably used to relying on their guardians or on those in charge of organizing the transport facilities provided by the madrasa. Owing to their restricted mobility, the young women may not have been as concerned about the details of how to get to the new madrasa.

The prospect of the Madrasatul Niswan’s expansion also gave rise to the question what the students intended to do after graduation. The Manager told me that they hoped to host up to one thousand students eventually, which implied that the madrasa would soon need more teachers. Against the background of these developments, I took up the occasion to ask students of different age groups what they wanted to do after graduation. While doing so, I paid attention to the students’ background, since I had become increasingly aware that many of the students and teachers had moved to Delhi from far-away places. For them the move itself was a big step that may well have a major impact on their future life. When I asked fourteen second year students what they wanted to do after they graduate, they answered in chorus that they wanted to teach in the Madrasatul Niswan or start new girls’ madrasas elsewhere. Similarly, a group of sixteen girls in the third year replied that they wanted to teach in the Madrasatul Niswan or in a similar girls’ madrasa elsewhere. By contrast, for sixteen girls studying in the final year in 2002 marriage ranked above anything else. When I asked them what they wanted to do after graduation, they answered in the following order: (1) get married; (2) teach in the Madrasatul Niswan if they need more teachers, teach elsewhere in similar girls’ madrasas, or start similar girls’ madrasas; (3) do tabligh (tabligh karenge); and (4) organize jamaat, which they defined as preaching and leading women’s meetings on Islamic topics in their respective communities. The order of the above replies indicates that while for the twelve to fourteen year old students the question of marriage did not seem to be important as yet, the graduates, who were roughly between sixteen and seventeen years of age at the time, appeared to be more aware that the prospect of marriage was of prime importance for their future.

With regard to the students’ preference for the teaching profession, the following explanations may help to shed light on the question why the students were so unanimously inclined toward taking up teaching and
nothing else. To begin with, the madrasa was in the process of expanding and those in charge hoped to find recognition with the Central Board for Secondary Education, owing to which they would need more teachers in the near future. In addition, as the madrasa was not recognized by the Central Board for Secondary Education as yet, most of the students may not have been aware of any other career choice, nor would most of them have been in a position to pursue further studies due to the relative lack of financial resources. Second, the curriculum and its underlying educational aims seem to prepare the students well for the teaching profession, as we saw in the previous chapter. Third, considering that the teachers in the Madrasatul Niswa were barely older and in some cases even younger than their students, it was easy for the latter to identify with the teachers. While on the one hand the non-existent age difference may have come at the cost of difficulties in maintaining discipline in the classroom from time to time, on the other hand the peer effect strengthened the teachers' function as role models for their students. Keeping in mind the limited space in the Nizamuddin madrasa, the teachers, whom the students saw more than their families in most cases, enjoyed respect and a relative freedom of movement, which the students admired. A fourth possible explanation is the high status enjoyed by the teaching profession, as it is generally seen as respectable career choice for women. By the same token, in an environment wherein female seclusion is practised to such an extent, it may be also perceived as an advantage that teaching in a girls' madrasa does not interfere too much with the obligations associated with married life. In short, the students' replies indicate that most of them were content with the prospects of marriage and teaching, as they primarily seemed to study for personal merit.

5.2 Remaking women: education, agency, and discipline

While studying in a madrasa and working as a teacher are seen as respectable for Muslim women living in seclusion, there may well be tensions between purdah and participating in the public sphere. To gain insight in these tensions, first the relations between education and feminism will be addressed. In *Remaking Women*, Abu-Lughod defines feminism in broad terms, namely as 'the wide range of projects that have or had as an explicit goal or necessary foundation the remaking of women' (Abu-Lughod 1998:23). In addition, examining the relationship between feminisms and Islam, Kandiyoti argues that 'in an increasingly 'globalized' world [...] the area of gender relations and women's conduct marks itself out as a zone of
struggle for conflicting bids of power and control' (Haw 1998:93). As a result, 'issues of women's rights are invariably [...] "part of an ideological terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity are debated and where women's appropriate place and conduct may be made to serve as boundary markers"' (Abu-Lughod 1998:3). Although the case studies in Remaking Women discuss more secular forms of education, Abu-Lughod addresses concerns that bear strong resemblance with my observations in the Madrasatu l Niswan.

In India the project of remaking women and the vision of the 'new woman' are rooted in late nineteenth century reformist ideas, as we saw in Chapter 1.2 Thanawi's afore mentioned Bihishti Zewar (Heavenly Ornaments) is noted as an example of the literature published in Muslim reformist circles that was shaped by the colonial encounter (Abu-Lughod 1998:19). The ensuing definitions of the 'new woman' gave rise to tensions between 'women's greater participation in the public world [...] and women's enormous responsibility for the domestic sphere' (Abu-Lughod 1998:8). Typically, questions regarding the images of the 'new woman' emerged in relation to postcoloniality and modernity (Abu-Lughod 1998:5). In defining what is 'modern', Abu-Lughod takes recourse to Rabinow's argument that 'it is impossible to define modernity; rather what one must do is to track the diverse ways the insistent claims to being modern are made' (Abu-Lughod 1998:7). In the Madrasatul Niswan, claims to modernity were made at different levels: the emergence of girls' madrasas is in itself a modern phenomenon (in the sense of a new development), the teaching methods are modern (in terms of teaching according to a fixed timetable and having exams and degrees), and modern subjects such as English and computer skills are taught. Although the context of the Madrasatul Niswan differs significantly from the more secular style of education discussed in Remaking Women, Abu-Lughod's claim that the modernization projects examined are both emancipating and regulatory is to some extent helpful for understanding the case of the girls' madrasa as well.

As we saw in the previous chapter, attending modern educational institutions simultaneously entails being exposed to and being socialized into new discourses about training the mind and building one's character, along with new practices of disciplining the body. With regard to such disciplining practices, Saba Mahmood's study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement (Mahmood 2005; 2001) sheds light on the question of agency in a context wherein women appear to acquiesce in what non-participants may perceive as oppressive conditions. In brief, in the women's mosque movement in Cairo, women from various socioeconomic backgrounds provide lessons for each other on
'Islamic scriptures, social practices, and forms of bodily comportment considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self' (Mahmood 2001:202). In an attempt to redefine agency cut loose from its associate concept of resistance to domination, Mahmood argues that agency can also mean the 'capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create' (Mahmood 2001:203). In other words, agency thus defined is the 'capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will [...]'; even if unintentional (Mahmood 2001:206). While liberalism linked the concept of self-realization with individual autonomy, the idea of self-realization per se precedes Western liberalism in its expression through religious and mystical traditions (Mahmood 2001:208). Urging to think in directions other than linking agency with progressive change and the prevalent normativity ascribed to freedom in feminist discourses, docility should be re-read as the willingness to be taught, or as 'ways in which individuals work on themselves to become the willing subjects of a particular discourse' (Mahmood 2001:210). The conscious effort at reorienting emotions, which Mahmood encountered among women in the mosque movement, is acknowledged as the highest degree in the practice of faith. This assessment is based on the Aristotelian view that the acquisition of moral values presupposes a relation between outward behaviour and inner dispositions, paired with the concept of _habitus_ coined by Bourdieu, which denotes the relationship between learning, memory, experience, and the self/body. In Mahmood's words, 'piety also entailed the inculcation of entire dispositions through a simultaneous training of the body, emotions, and reason as sites of discipline until the religious virtues acquired the status of embodied habits' (Mahmood 2001:212). By contrast, 'to analyze people's actions in terms of realized or frustrated attempts at social transformation is to necessarily reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination' (Mahmood 2001:222). Instead, agency can mean developing a modest self, perfecting the ideal of embodied piety, and thus also the continuity of a 'discursive tradition that holds subordination to a transcendent will (and thus, in many instances, to male authority) as its coveted goal' (Mahmood 2001:204).

5.3 **Purdah: being physically present but socially absent?**

In the Madrasatul Niswan, one marker of 'embodied piety' is purdah, which denotes female segregation, modest dress, and veiling. In Frogs in a Well, Patricia Jeffery discusses purdah among women associated with one of the two Nizamuddin shrines. Rather than presenting them as victims of a
rigid Islamic tradition or as oppressed, Jeffery's observations highlight the complexity and ambivalence in the women's lives. For the women associated with the Nizamuddin shrine purdah, female seclusion, and refraining from working outside the home equal luxury (Jeffery 2000:24). In this case study, purdah is defined in the following way: (1) as an ideology based on Islam; (2) as an expression of social stratification; and (3) as related to the concepts of honour and shame. Jeffery's notion of purdah may be summarized as 'physical presence while being socially absent' (Jeffery 2000:104).

However, for the women in the Madrasatul Niswan, such a description would be problematic. To begin with, the young women in the Madrasatul Niswan are present in the public, even if in a specific way. In order to understand their presence, a brief digression on the concept of the modern public sphere is needed. Central to the conventional Habermasian notion of the modern public sphere is that participants are considered as equals, not hindered by attachment to particular interests or identities. Communication is based on the rational exchange of ideas and opinions about issues of the common good. Rather than particular identities, only the power of rational argumentation is acknowledged (Habermas 1974). Yet, the assumption that participants would be able to bracket inequalities of status and that the outcome of debates would not be influenced by the identities and social positions of the participants, has been convincingly criticized (see Calhoun 1992).

Pointing out that the public sphere is, in fact, an arena for the formation and enactment of social identities, some have argued that rather than employing the concept of a unified public sphere, it is more productive to start from a proliferation of publics. Fraser (1992), for instance, proposes to employ the term 'subaltern counterpublics'; that is 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (Fraser 1992:123). Although the Madrasatul Niswan is not so much an arena for debate than a space for the enactment of particular identities, it can be seen as a counterpublic. Such counter-publics are particularly likely to emerge in stratified societies, which are defined as 'societies whose basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination' (Fraser 1992:122). Warner defines a counterpublic as a public that maintains awareness of its subordinate status and sets itself off against a dominant public (Warner 2002:86). In addition, Fraser points out that 'however limited a public may be in its empirical manifestation at any given time, its members understand themselves as part of a potentially wider public' (Fra-
ser 1992:124); she also suggests that subaltern publics carry ‘emancipatory potential’ (Fraser 1992:124).

We saw that post 9/11 the Indian madrasas drew much public attention in the media. As a result, stereotypes regarding madrasa education were made explicit and had to be argued out, because the former subaltern reacted and challenged many of the stereotypes, as we saw in Chapter 2. While the Hindu majority presents itself as the unmarked category in the public sphere, within the counter public sphere too the question emerges who represents the Madrasatul Niswan, because also within a counter public sphere inequalities continue to exist. In the Madrasatul Niswan I observed inequalities based on caste, class, and the difference between rural and urban backgrounds. Language, for example, represents a divider that cut across all of the above factors. While the Principal badi appa and the young women belonging to the ‘core families’ were apt speakers of Arabic and used ‘elaborate’ Urdu with confidence, others needed Hindi translations in order to understand the Urdu textbooks. Many girls came from non-Urdu speaking families, or their spoken Urdu did not contain the same Persian and Arabic influences as in the case of the young women belonging to the ‘core families’, because their primary education had been in Hindi, or they were the first (female) family members to receive any kind of formal education. Despite claims to equality, the existing inequalities within the counter public sphere suggest that the ‘core families’, and in particular their male members, appear as the unmarked category. Moreover, my findings suggest that merely having access to or participating in some sort of public sphere does not necessarily imply equal voice, as differences along the lines of gender, class, and caste were at stake.

There is another line of criticism of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere that is relevant to the discussion on the Madrasatul Niswan. As Moors (2005 forthcoming) has pointed out, this notion is also limiting in its exclusive focus on rational debate as the only legitimate form of participating in the modern public sphere, for this means that other forms and styles of communication are a-priori seen as ineffective and undesirable. If, however, the public sphere is recognized as an arena wherein group identities and interests are always at stake, then there is a need for a more all-encompassing ‘politics of presence’ that allows for the inclusion of other forms of critical expression and non-verbal modes of communication. Such a ‘politics of presence’ becomes especially relevant when discussing contributions of subaltern groups that may be less well versed in effectively presenting their points of view in normalized and hence acceptable formats of rational argu-
mentation'. Forms and styles of presentation may include, for instance, bodily comportment, appearance, and dressing styles. Wearing modest dress can be an act of participation in the public sphere, because it may be perceived as a statement by the public, even though making a statement may not be the (primary) intention of the wearer. Similarly, (girls') madrasas like the Madrasatul Niswan are a form of 'presence' in the Indian public sphere, as by virtue of its physical presence the Madrasatul Niswan interacts with and participates in the wider public sphere. Although the graduates' position as learned women may not be acknowledged by the public owing to a host of factors, the young women in purdah still appear to participate in the public through their presence. Granting that participation through presence and through making a statement by wearing modest dress may be unintentional and difficult to control, such forms of presence nevertheless have an effect on the public, which is contrary to being 'socially absent'.

In keeping with Mahmood's findings regarding women's agency and modesty, the extent to which the young women in the Madrasatul Niswan appeared to be aware of and took pride in living in purdah sheds light on how the cultivation of a modest and pious self can mean agency. The young women in the Madrasatul Niswan were gradually socialized into the community's habitus through the subtle yet all-pervading lessons in adab, which centre on the topic of female modesty as expressed through wearing modest dress. Outside the madrasa, the teachers and students wearing modest dress may be perceived as reminders of a moral superiority vis-à-vis any non-purdah observing woman and vis-à-vis any man whose gaze the women in purdah attempt to escape. In that respect a woman in purdah can be a powerful symbol to others, as to the Muslim woman who does not observe purdah she may be a moral reminder of a normative value and to the bypasser she may seem anything ranging from oppressed to praiseworthy.

While Jeffery's case study suggests that the extent to which women can afford to live in purdah may set them apart from women of a lower social standing', the relation between purdah and 'living in luxury' needs to be briefly revisited. In keeping with Fahmy's argument regarding the School for Midwives in Egypt (Abu-Lughod 1998), the status of the graduates of the Madrasatul Niswan may well be compromised by their low social standing. The majority of the Madrasatul Niswan's graduates is from a lower to lower middle-class background, and in addition the Founder, Manager, 'core families', and most of the students also have a low-caste background. Such a combination of factors may easily undermine the graduates' standing vis-à-vis high-caste Muslim communities, or vis-à-vis those 'in authority' who
claim high descent. Simultaneously, however, purdah provides lower castes with a strategy facilitating upward social mobility, as a sense of modesty, patience, and obedience – all virtues that are considered ‘civilized’ (Minault 1998:45) – is instilled in the young women through socialization.

5.4 The ‘women behind the curtain’

The following examples highlight the meanings of purdah, the nexus between agency and discipline, and public presence for differently positioned women in the Madrasatul Niswan, namely for the women of the ‘core families’, for those outside the ‘core families’, and for the ‘less disciplined’ cases.6

Women of the ‘core families’

The most ‘public’ woman inside the Madrasatul Niswan was, without doubt, the Principal badi appa. Being in her late twenties, the madrasa’s Founder’s daughter was married with three children and a fourth on the way at the time of my fieldwork. Among the teachers, she formed the exception with regard to her age. As a result, owing equally to her age and her weight, the other teachers and students used to address her as badi appa’ or ‘big elder sister’. Badi appa was born in the Barabanki district close to Lucknow, as the third of nine siblings. As opposed to her daughters, who attended the prestigious Delhi Public School during the free afternoon classes held in Hindi, badi appa had received her primary education in the Yaseen Education Centre for Muslim girls in Nizamuddin. Because other teachers from the ‘core families’ made similar references to the Yaseen Education Centre when I asked them about their primary education, I wanted to find out what this institution was all about.

Badi appa told me that the Yaseen Education Centre used to be a small (chhota-mota) building in the vicinity of the so-called Kali Masijd8 or mosque, both located at walking distance from the Madrasatul Niswan. When she attended the Centre, it was a privately run Urdu medium school for Muslim girls from the neighbourhood. As far as badi appa could recall, an engineer had set up the small school over thirty years ago, delegated the task of running the school to a female manager, and saw to it that a recognized curriculum for primary education was taught. One day, badi appa sent for one of the third year students to accompany me to the house Yaseen Education Centre’s founder, or at least to the place where the Centre used to be, as badi appa was not sure whether the school was still in use.
Although being a student she was obliged to observe purdah at all times, the girl left the madrasa without the company of a ‘guardian’. She did not even wear a burqa when we ventured into the neighbourhood bazaars, which the madrasa’s Manager did not seem to mind either when we passed him on our way out. Later on I thought that the only explanation for the scenario was that the student in question was below the official age of enrolment to the madrasa and hence also below the age of purdah. As she was one of the younger girls belonging to the ‘core families’, I could only assume that she was still below the official age of admission to the Madrasatul Niswan. Despite her young age, she probably obtained permission to study in the madrasa precisely because of her family ties with the ‘core families’.

We first walked through narrow alleys lined with small shops and then took a turn that led us along the withered walls of Kali Masjid. A little further we entered a narrow wooden door, which lead through an equally narrow passage that opened into the spacious courtyard of a haveli or mansion. It took only a second for the young man who spotted us to call the daughter of the Yaseen Education Centre’s founder, who then welcomed and accompanied us into one of the many open rooms looking out on the courtyard. As we had come unannounced, the bedding was still lying on the ground, but with a distinct disregard for this given, our host gestured for us to sit down. The young woman had been the last teacher of the Yaseen Education Centre, which ultimately closed its doors in 2002. Explaining why the Centre had closed down, she said that since she and her sister were married with children, they did not have time anymore for running the school. After a short pause she added that her father had started the school over thirty years ago, at a time when there were no other schools for Muslim girls in this neighbourhood. As this had changed over time, she concluded with a smile that the school had lost its function of providing both primary as well as adult education to an average of roughly fifty students at a time.

Suddenly the founder entered the room and asked in impeccable English what had brought me to his house. As soon as I had told him the purpose of my visit, he joined us with a broad smile on his face and started what resembled a lecture. I had told him about my research in the nearby Madrasatul Niswan and that I wanted to know more about the Yaseen Education Centre. In line with this brief background information, he said that in the term *dini madaris* (Islamic seminaries), the word din or faith stands for character, owing to which the function of the dini madaris should be to mould the students’ character, whether they are Muslims or not. Expound-
ing further on his views regarding Islam and being a Muslim, he added that in his opinion everyone who is obedient to God is a Muslim, as this is the original meaning of Islam. Because he considered any claims to exclusivity or absolute truth as sins, he suggested that to exclude others or to condemn their faith invariably made a person fall outside the fold of the Muslim community. Continuing his train of thought, he voiced his conviction that everyone should go for the Hajj, as the Kaaba belonged to all Abrahamic faiths and should not exclude followers of other beliefs. In his words, education was to teach that there is no exclusive truth in any religion. As a concluding remark in passing, he told me that he was a descendant of the saint Nizamuddin Auliya, who gave the area its name. The contrast could not have been sharper than between the claims to exclusivity I had heard in the Madrasatul Niswan and the broadmindedness of the Yaseen Education Centre's founder. It struck me that his married daughters continued to live in his house, but I had encountered similar practices in the family of the Sufi's daughter mentioned in the previous chapter.

Returning to one of the Yaseen Education Centre's former students, namely badi appa: her family had shifted from the Barabanki district to Delhi when her father took up a teaching assignment in the Kashful Ulum Madrasa for boys in the Tablighi Markaz in Nizamuddin. It was then that she began to attend classes at the Yaseen Education Centre, following which badi appa received her secondary education in the Jamiatu Salhehat in Malegaon. At the time of my fieldwork she taught Islamic law (fiqh) to the final year's students, along with exegesis (tafsir), Arabic, English, and also Farsi was planned as a new subject. Badi appa, her husband, their children, and a changing number of teachers lived in a narrow three-storied building in a gali or alley just around the corner from the Madrasatul Niswan. As the main building of the Madrasatul Niswan was already too small at the time, some of the unmarried teachers from Lucknow, Bahraich, and Malegaon stayed either with badi appa and her family, or in the building opposite their small house. Similarly, the main building too served as a multifunctional space, wherein the students studied, slept, ate, spent their free time, and often also the holidays for the entire duration of their studies. Despite the immense budget mentioned in the Madrasatul Niswan's brochure, there did not seem to be any leads suggesting that the money raised was used to meet the private needs of those in charge.

Badi appa appeared to be the most visible, the most heard of, the most referred to, and the most respected teacher in the Madrasatul Niswan. As the Founder's daughter and the Manager's wife she enjoyed a certain
status to begin with, and she was also considered a role model for her piety and excellence in knowledge. With regard to their status, the same held for the daughters of the ‘core families’ to some extent. Badi appa and the girls from the ‘core families’ shared a similar family background, as the ‘core families’ came from the same Barabanki district. However, as the girls from the ‘core families’ were much younger than badi appa, they were generally seen as aspiring to the elder’s degree of accomplishment.

Like the Manager, the father of one of the teachers from the ‘core families’ had also studied in the Kashful Ulum Madrasa for boys and continued to teach there, just like the Founder. Two of the teacher’s younger sisters and a number of cousins were also enrolled in the Madrasatul Niswan as students or taught there at the time of my fieldwork. While she had also studied in the Yaseen Education Centre, as opposed to badi appa she referred to it as a ‘school’ instead of a madrasa. With a view to her family background she highlighted that the men in her family dedicated every Thursday and Friday to carrying out tablighi work. She also expressed regret that there were no similar requirements for girls, although in her words the practices of the tablighi activists functioned as a role model for women. As her mother had not studied in a madrasa, she and her two sisters were the first girls in her family to do so. Another younger sister of hers below the age of purdah attended the Delhi Public School together with badi appa’s daughters. In addition to the community’s belief that girls should acquire as much secular knowledge as possible prior to the age of purdah, the strive for upward social mobility appeared to be another significant factor at play. Upward social mobility also seemed to be possible through better marriage prospects due to Islamic education and the internalization of adab. In that respect, one of my interlocutors in the Old City suggested that I should keep my eyes open with regard to issues related to female labour migration to the Gulf States. He pointed out that some of teachers may not teach primarily out of religious motivation, but with a view to ‘qualifying’ for a husband working or studying in the Gulf States, and one such case was, in fact, brought to my attention in the Madrasatul Niswan.

Roughly one year after she graduated from the Madrasatul Niswan, the above-mentioned teacher from the ‘core families’ got married in August 2002. As she was only fifteen years old, she was considered too young to live with her husband, who was an Indian student in a madrasa for boys in Medina. Once her in-laws had left for Riyadh and her husband for Medina, the new bride temporarily returned to her parents’ house. She also took up teaching again for the time being. In our conversations, she highlighted the
value of the gold jewellery that her husband and in-laws had given her, as she proudly displayed her ornamental gold rings. Initially, the young woman continued to live with her parents in Nizamuddin for a few months, and this arrangement was supposed to last for about a year. During that year she intended to carry on teaching the Mansurat and the Qirat-ur-rashida to the second and third year students in the Madrasatul Niswan. Following this interim period, she was supposed to join her husband in Medina. When I asked her what she was planning to do there, she said that she would not teach in Medina, because she wanted to continue her studies. She also told me that there was a well-known girls' madrasa in Medina, for which her in-laws had already sought enrolment on her behalf.

However, instead of staying with her family for another year, it was soon decided that the bride would join her husband in Medina after Bakr-e-Eid in early February 2003, because the family deemed it better for her to be reunited with her husband as soon as possible. The young woman was visibly delighted at the prospect of seeing her husband again that soon. Prior to her relatively sudden departure, she took a leave from her teaching activities to bid her grandparents farewell in their village. Upon her return from her grandparents’ place, the bride told me that as her in-laws lived in Riyadh, she and her husband, who by then had come to India to ‘fetch her’ (us ko lene ke liye), would live by themselves. She was also happy to recount that her husband had already found an apartment for them, and that he had bought furniture especially for her, because as a student he used to live in a single room. The above story suggests that for the young bride, who came from the same lower caste Ansari background as the Founder and Manager of the Madrasatul Niswan, her education and accomplishment in leading a pious life facilitated what most would consider a good marriage, as she was to settle abroad with the son of a relatively well-to-do family.

While the above teacher got married and settled in Saudi Arabia, her sixteen year old cousin was still unmarried. She taught English, exegesis (tafsir), and Islamic law (fiqh) to the first to third year’s students, and she opined that she was not at all eager to get married either, as she gave priority to continuing her studies and to teaching in the Madrasatul Niswan. She appeared to follow the example of her father, who according to her saw teaching as more than a profession. As a result, he deemed it important for her, along with her sisters, cousins, and for his daughters-in-law to study or teach in the Madrasatul Niswan. In her words, he ‘got upset’ whenever one of them missed out on one day of studying or teaching. While the other teachers often referred to her as lazy, sleepy, and notoriously late for her teaching
duties, this hardly appeared to coincide with the very active and assertive impression she made. With regard to her 'laziness', she admitted that even though she was used to waking up early in the morning for her first prayer, she usually went back to sleep afterwards. As a result, she faced great difficulties waking up again to begin her daily teaching duties on time.

Like her married cousin, she was born and raised in Delhi and graduated from the Madrasatul Niswan in 2001 at fifteen years of age. The cousins' graduation age suggests that the girls from the 'core families' were up to two years younger than the other graduates when they received their fazilat degrees. A third teacher, whom I will introduce in the following section, got married to one of the cousin's elder brothers, and they all lived together as a 'joint family' in the basti Nizamuddin. Unlike many other teachers who did not live in the vicinity of the Madrasatul Niswan, this teacher was in a position to go home every day, and hence she also had to share in the household chores. The teacher's privileges included the permission to occasionally go to the nearby bazaar alone in order to buy fabrics and suit pieces for herself. She also enjoyed a certain freedom at home, as apart from having access to books she knew from the Madrasatul Niswan, she was also allowed to read books on 'general knowledge'. The teacher qualified the latter as politics, geography, and medicine, along with Urdu magazines provided by one of her older brothers. When I asked how her self-studies combined with the household chores that were expected of her, she plainly said that 'whoever has time helps in the house'. This also included the male family members, because whenever they received male guests from the Tablighi Markaz, her brothers were expected to tend to the men. Besides her self-studies, other pastimes included sports, such as playing badminton. With regard to physical exercise she immediately pointed out that the requirements laid out by purdah formed a major practical problem. She seemed all the more delighted to relate that unlike now, the new madrasa in Okhla with its lawn and rooftop terrace would be protected from outsiders' gazes in such a way that the students would be able to play and exercise there. For the time being, on many occasions the teachers and students voiced regrets that there was no space for physical exercise or for outdoor activities in the tiny Nizamuddin madrasa, which they unanimously considered healthy. The above story of the married teacher's cousin indicates that even within the same family degrees of freedom, privileges, and duties vary from case to case. Within the same household social roles may differ to a great extent among peers, as we will see in the following example of the sister-in-law, who lived with the same family.
At age twenty-two, the cousin's sister-in-law did not have children yet, although her marriage had taken place more than four years ago. On many occasions she expressed distress about her childlessness and asked me to pray for her, so she would conceive soon. Strikingly enough she appeared to valorize the *dua* of a non-Muslim for this purpose. Her stories made clear that she carried much more responsibility for various household chores than for example the two teachers mentioned above, although the three young women equally taught full-time in the Madrasatul Niswan. Apart from the 'daily nuisances', of which the sister-in-law gave the example of having to prepare different dishes for breakfast early in the morning while everyone else was still asleep, a more urgent problem was that all the family members of the in-laws' household were much slimmer than she was. Because her husband in particular preferred slender women, her curves made her feel even more miserable.

When I asked whether the pressure exerted on her to lose weight had anything to do with particular beliefs regarding what a woman should look like, she said that the matter of dieting and trimming down had nothing to do with Islam. It was rather her husband's preference that made her wish to look more like her sisters-in-law, who in turn said that they considered themselves ugly and wished they had more curves. Still, the daughter-in-law continuously asked me for advice regarding dieting and exercising regimes. Ultimately she succeeded in losing some weight, although her continuing chores and teaching duties left her tired and much more quiet than before. Some time later she told me that the situation had become even worse, as her husband now openly threatened to leave her if she were to gain any more weight. She emphasized that it was her duty to please him, which in her words had everything to do with Islam. As a consequence, the sister-in-law went to great lengths in order to give her body the shape he desired, out of fear of losing him. Her earlier good humoured, self-confident, and outspoken nature faded with her weight melting away, giving way to a much more serious and fashion-conscious young woman, who no longer chattered about picnics at India Gate and egg *paranthe* from her favourite food stall in South Delhi. Instead, she began to wear high heels and fashionable black mini *kurtis*.

In 'Femininity and its Discontents', Meenakshi Thapan analyzes urban Indian women's experiences with regard to their bodies and sexuality. Even though Thapan's sample of women surveyed did not include Muslim women, some of her observations sounded strikingly familiar, for example when talking about how women internalize the idea of being a 'body-for-
others' (Thapan 1997:173). In the sister-in-law's story, being a 'body-for-others' meant that she saw it as an obligation dictated by Islam to lose weight in order to please her husband. Furthermore, Thapan notes the influence of the media in shaping perceptions of the female body. Borrowing a phrase of Bordo, she claims that 'the rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through standardized visual images' (Thapan 1997:174). As a consequence, she suggests that the ‘concern with what is considered excessive weight and with the shapely female body which emerges in the women's narratives is to a large extent a reflection of what Kim Chernin (1981) refers to as the ‘tyranny of slenderness’ in the west’ (Thapan 1997:173).

Similarly, the sister-in-law's ‘domestic trials' hint at a clash between the community's beliefs and alternative ideals. Contrary to what we saw in the previous chapter regarding beliefs about the body, namely that it was thought to be 'good' the way God created it, the above example indicates how beliefs may be overruled by competing ideas. The sister-in-law's case indicates that some of the young women in the Madrasatul Niswan did not only adjust to a particular ideal of Islamic womanhood, as the sister-in-law also seemed to subject to certain Western and Indian middle-class notions of womanhood. After all, the sister-in-law's husband threatened to leave her if she were to gain more weight. Due to the sister-in-law's story I also became increasingly aware of how the men in this Muslim community seemed to be more exposed to media and 'Western' influences than the women living in purdah. Interviews and informal conversations with men from the same community suggested that, under the motto ‘know thy enemy'15, the men were generally well informed regarding things more or less forbidden, such as the latest Hollywood and Bollywood films, popular television serials, cell phones, and the internet. As a result, the men often seemed to be torn between their beliefs and images representing entirely different norms and values. Their wives in turn16, like the sister-in-law introduced in the above story, tend to find themselves caught between a conservative particular trend of Islamic beliefs and practices on the one hand, and Western and Indian middle-class ideals that permeate urban India on the other hand. In that sense, the above story suggests that alternative forms of disciplining of the body may be equally important, as it is not only the madrasa that disciplines.
Those outside the 'core families'

Besides the 'core families' of the Nizamuddin madrasa there were also a number of teachers and students who came to the madrasa from outside the capital. Their family backgrounds differed from that of the 'core families', as they often came from rural areas, and because they were often the only women in their families to receive formal (madrasa) education or to pursue a professional career as teachers. Apart from the above-mentioned differences, some of these teachers and students were particularly important for the madrasa, since they reinforced links between the Madrasatul Niswan and its two affiliated girls' madrasas in Lucknow and Malegaon. In addition, their stories indicate how, in line with Mahmood's argument, agency can mean acquiring religious merit for oneself, one's family, and for the community at large through studying or teaching in a girls' madrasa.

As opposed to the teachers introduced so far, at age twenty-four one of the 'older' unmarried teachers was born in Bahraich as the daughter of a local school Headmaster. She had six brothers and sisters and received her secondary education at the Jamia Noorul Islam in Lucknow. She was the first and only girl in the family to initially study and then teach in a girls' madrasa. Furthermore, the young woman conveyed the impression of being a committed and strikingly serious teacher, who was also comparatively strict in her interactions with the students. She taught exegesis (tafsir) and the earlier mentioned Qirat-ur-rashida to the second to fourth year's students. In the afternoons she was part of the small group of teachers who regularly visited the Inayat Khan Foundation, where courses in machine knitting and cloth painting were offered. Apart from her regular shifts as a warden in the Madrasatul Niswan, during which she remained inside the madrasa to watch over the students beyond teaching hours, she otherwise lived with badi appa's family nearby. When I asked her why she had chosen to study in a madrasa, keeping in mind that none of her family members had set a precedent for it, she said that it had been a question of merit for the entire family for her to do so, which was the formulaic reply I received on most occasions when asking the above question.

The teacher's friend was twenty-one and came from a small place close to Mumbai. Similar to her friend's family constellation she had four siblings, none of whom had studied in a madrasa. By contrast, she received her secondary education in the Jamiatus Salehat in Malegaon with the permission of her parents. After graduation, the Principal of the Jamiatus Salehat 'sent' her to the Madrasatul Niswan to teach the Mansurat. The teacher's two elder sisters were already married, and her two brothers ran small businesses simi-
lar to that of their father, who was a textile trader. As the train journey home took almost two days, she told me that during vacations usually one of her brothers came to pick her up and accompany her on the long journey south. Her family's expectations appeared to stand in sharp contrast with her full-time teaching assignment in the madrasa. She said that whenever she went home, her family expected her to dedicate herself fully to household chores, as if to make up for the time she spent studying and teaching otherwise. As an exception to the above pattern, after the vacation following Eid-ul-Fitr in 2002, she was proud to relate that this time her parents had taken her for a one-day trip to see a waterfall in the vicinity of her native small town, which had meant an exceptional break from the otherwise sober homework routine. Around the same time, the other teachers started to mention jokingly that she appeared to 'like' her friend's younger brother very much. According to the other teachers the families were already in the process of negotiating the prospect of marriage between the two.

The stories of the two befriended teachers from Bahraich and Mumbai convey a different sense of self than in the cases of the teachers and students introduced so far. Both came from very different family backgrounds than the girls belonging to the 'core families', as they were the only ones in their respective families to study and then teach in a madrasa. As a result, while the students and teachers from the 'core families' appeared to view themselves as part of a wider network of equal-minded people, these two young women stood quite alone in their respective families. Above anything else their studies and work represented an act of religious merit for their families, as they formulated it.

Besides these two befriended teachers who had received their degrees from the affiliated Malegaon and Lucknow madrasas, there was yet another teacher from Lucknow. The young woman was in her mid-twenties and although she had been born in Lucknow, she spent her youth in Jeddah, where her father used to work as an engineer. When reaching the 'age of purdah', she returned to India to stay with her family in Lucknow and received her secondary education in the Jamia Noorul Islam. She moved from Lucknow to Delhi once she got married to an engineer who lived in the capital, and like the sister-in-law mentioned above she did not yet have children. Maybe that was also one of the reasons why her husband readily arranged for her weekly trips from South Delhi to Nizamuddin, where she usually stayed for three to four nights a week, in order to make the long journey worthwhile. Apart from teaching English in the Madrasatul Niswan, she also continued her own studies. From August 2002 onwards she was...
among the first teachers to start the nursery section of the new madrasa in Okhla. When I asked her why she had studied in the Jamia Noorul Islam, she patiently explained that 'everyone' knew that it was one of the best girls' madrasas in India. In an equally patient manner she added that the Jamia Noorul Islam followed the same curriculum as the Madrasatu l Niswa n and the Jamiatu s Salehat in Malegaon. However, she did not mention the distant family ties between the founders of these three girls' madrasas, which ensure the frequent exchange of students and teachers between the three institutions. As we saw before, such exchanges primarily depend on the permission or ijaza of the parents, guardians, or husbands, along with that of the respective Principal.

The above cases indicate that the young women from outside the 'core families' played an important role for maintaining relations within the network formed by the three girls' madrasas mentioned above. In addition, their cases demonstrate how for these young women studying in a madrasa or teaching in a girls' madrasa later on may represent acts of religious merit for them, their families, and for the community at large.

The 'less disciplined' cases

Not all the young women were equally taken with the disciplining processes of the Madrasatul Niswan. In order to highlight how agency can be discerned in the disruption of set patterns, role models, and customs, two students and a befriended young woman who came to visit the madrasa are presented here as contrasting cases. At age sixteen and born in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh, a new student arrived at the Madrasatul Niswa n some weeks after the start of the academic year in August 2002. Although she was much older than any of the other first year students, this was the place she had been assigned. She made it clear from the very beginning that her enrolment was only temporary, as she only intended to stay for the total duration of one year. She said that spending a year in a girls' madrasa was her own choice, because she wanted to understand 'Islamic culture' better prior to seeking admission to Aligarh Muslim University, where she hoped to fulfill her dream of studying Unani medicine. So far, she had attended a Public School, but with a view to the future it was 'Aligarh or nothing', as she said time and again. Owing to her earlier exposure to non-Islamic education, she was among the few young women in the Madrasatul Niswa n who spoke English fluently. It took her some time to get used to the austere way of life in the madrasa, because her sudden life as a boarder
appeared to offer close to no diversions, but over time she became increasingly appreciated for her patience and skilfulness in decorating suit pieces with hand painted floral designs. At the same time she seemed to enjoy her position as an outsider in many respects. What set her apart was that she enjoyed speaking English, she was older than her fellow students, her stay in the madrasa was only temporary, and finally she had an attitude that was not at all demure like that of the majority of young women studying or teaching in the Madrasatul Niswan.

Similarly, there was a fourth year student from a remote area in Delhi, whose father had decided that she should continue her studies in a madrasa, although in her family she was again the only young woman to do so. While her father had justified this decision as an act of religious merit for the entire family, the student emphasized that above anything else she felt that his decision was more of a burden on her. Quite like the student introduced above, this young woman was comfortable speaking English. She emphasized that out of all the books studied in the Madrasatul Niswan, she especially liked the *English Reader*, because it contained ‘foreign things’. What also set her apart was that she had a driver’s license, as her father was a car salesman. She told me that she loved driving around, as it gave her a feeling of independence and freedom. Apart from driving, she loved listening to ‘Western’ music and to Madonna in particular, as she told me on many occasions. In the face of her classmates’ visible disapproval regarding both activities, she simply discarded their principles as ‘stupid’.

When I asked the same student what she wanted to do following her expected graduation in 2004, she told me that she hoped to pass her ‘10+2’ Secondary Board Exams at the Jamia Millia Islamia University, where madrasa students were allowed to appear as private candidates, as we saw in the previous chapter with regard to the Jamiatul Zehra. She added with determination in her voice that she wished to pursue her studies, although she did not know yet in which subject. With regard to the student’s demeanour, it is worth noting that even this ‘rebel’ changed over time. When I first met her, the young woman’s views stood in sharp contrast with the worldview and beliefs of most of the other women in the Madrasatul Niswan. Moreover, she voiced them publicly, irrespective of the sensibilities of her fellow students and teachers. As her outspoken opinions and defiant behaviour did not go unnoticed, by the time she reached her final year she had become visibly more demure. Apart from losing weight, which added to her more mature appearance, apparently she had shed some ‘wild hairs’ too. As a result, she seemed reluctant to communicate with me on later occasions,
perhaps because she felt uncomfortable about her earlier straightforward attitude. Although the two students introduced above initially displayed signs of direct resistance to the madrasa's 'civilizing mission', in both cases their attitudes changed and their resistance weakened over time. While in the case of the first student the change began to set in after a few months already, in the second case it took years for the madrasa's subtle disciplining measures to show results.

As a final example, I would like to mention a young woman who neither studied nor taught in the Madrasatul Niswan. She was a friend of the above-mentioned teacher from Bahraich, who merely came to visit Delhi for two days. Like her friend, the young woman had been born in a 'far-off place in a village' close to Bahraich. She travelled together with her husband and her infant son, as the latter required medical attention. After consulting a popular Muslim doctor in Nizamuddin, she came to spend the afternoon with her friend in the staff room of the Madrasatul Niswan. As her friend was still teaching a class, the young woman engaged me in an insightful conversation about her life, the female body, disease, and the dilemmas of rural women.

Similar to her friend, the young woman was in her early twenties, but unlike her friend she got married at a young age. Initially she pointed out that having two sons meant a blessing, because having male offspring secured her standing within her in-law's household. But it also meant a challenge, since giving birth to and raising the boys in the village had left her emaciated and weak. While her older son attended a boarding school, the younger one lived with her and the joint family in the village. The infant boy suffered from a 'skin condition' that worried her a lot. Apart from seeking medical attention for him, she pointed out that she had wanted to see the doctor as well with a view to her continuous weight loss, which had gradually led to chronic fatigue and a condition she described as 'general weakness'. While the young woman lived under similar conditions as the sister-in-law we met earlier in this chapter, by contrast this young woman's presence seemed to fill the staff room with an air of accusation directed against the unfair conditions she had to endure as the daughter-in-law to a rural joint family. Although she may not have been in a position to change much about her condition, she appeared less constrained in voicing her concerns, because as opposed to the other young women in the madrasa, she was much less preoccupied with her demeanour.

While the education provided by the madrasa with its requirements regarding the girls' demeanour hardly seems to allow for the students and teachers to speak about potentially objectionable issues, their visit-
ing friends were more vocal in voicing critique regarding their position as women in society, about their husbands, or concerning the joint family system. These brief observations suggest that the education imparted in the madrasa appears to influence the young women's worldview, way of life, dress, demeanour, and language substantially. The impact of the often subtle disciplining could be discerned in the brief examples of the madrasa's 'civilizing mission,' especially in the cases of the non-madrasa attending girls who nevertheless adjusted to the subtle requirements they were confronted with. Their adjustment became discernible at the hand of visible markers such as dress, body care, and donning hijab, as we saw in the examples of the former cleaner and the twins in the previous chapter. The above cases above indicate how for all women developing a pious self and internalizing 'civilized' manners affected their standing positively. In the Madrasatul Niswan hierarchies also depended on the levels of Islamic knowledge acquired, a form of cultural capital easier available to the women from the 'core families'. Still, women from outside the capital had clearly gained religious merit for their families as well as cultural capital in their communities of origin. Simultaneously, with a view to upward social mobility also other forms of knowledge were helpful, and acquiring non-Islamic knowledge (prior to puberty) was deemed desirable especially within the 'core families'. Finally, upward social mobility also seemed to be possible through better marriage prospects facilitated by Islamic education and the internalization of adab.

5.5 A question of authority

Apart from the issues of merit and upward social mobility, I would now like to discuss the question whether what is taught in the Madrasatul Niswan allows the young women to claim authority in Islamic matters, that is to claim authority in the public. Let me begin with a brief comment on the question of authority made by the above-mentioned teacher who graduated from the Jamia Noorul Islam in Lucknow years ago and followed a number of additional courses in the Nizamuddin madrasa. She pointed to the fact that while for boys there is a mufti course, no such course exists for women. Hereby she indicated that, apart from teaching in a girls' madrasa, other career options in line with the five-year course in Islamic theology do not yet exist for young women. She added that in her opinion a mufti course for women would not come into being in the future either, because according to her the role of female madrasa graduates is limited to giving

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informal advice and to making personal use of their knowledge. In her opinion the hierarchy of academic degrees in Islamic theology implied the following: the alim degree means that one is learned but without authority to use the knowledge, studying for the fazila degree deepens one's knowledge, and the mufti course, which authorizes the issuing of fatawa and the transmission of religious knowledge, does not exist for women. Although accepting the latter means to continue denying women access to professional trajectories in the Islamic legal sector, she concluded that ultimately nothing would stand in the way of post-graduate studies for women per se, as it all depends on the girls' wishes. However optimistic the teacher's views regarding the graduates' wishes being decisive, my findings suggest that the guardians' wishes and expectations were equally crucial for shaping the young women's future.

Turning to the academic literature, Abou El Fadl's study on Islamic law, authority, and women titled Speaking in God's Name is helpful for its definitions of the notion of authority. While it is assumed that there are no elites in Islam, that truth is seen as accessible to all, and that the individual is held accountable for his/her deeds, Abou El Fadl points out that the egalitarian outlook of Islam tends to become corrupted by anxieties vis-à-vis ideas that threaten to deconstruct what is viewed as authoritative (Abou El Fadl 2001:11), which is a point that I will return to. With regard to accountability, in the Madrasatul Niswa the idea of individual accountability can be detected in the everyday discourse. Owing to its spiritual proximity with the Tablighi Jamaat, which represents a milieu wherein accountability is expressed in clearcut sums through which one can calculate the merits of everyday actions for the Hereafter, most of the students and teachers appeared to be driven by the strive to internalize correct practice.

Introducing the distinction between coercive and persuasive authority, the author elaborates that while on the basis of coercion a surrender of judgment takes place, on the basis of persuasion this process is more reflective. With a view to madrasa education, the definition of coercive authority reminds of the common stereotype that learning takes place without understanding. As a counter argument to the above stereotypical image, it is worth noting once more that in the case of the Madrasatul Niswa my observations did not provide evidence indicating that a surrender of judgment tends to take place under coercion. Instead, I would like to suggest that in a context wherein the cultivation of a pious and docile self represents the ideal, the above distinction between coercive and persuasive authority is not very helpful. While a total 'surrender of judgment' may not be the rule,
there are circumstances under which principles associated with beliefs may overrule reflective judgment, even without coercion.

Even though there may be no elites in Islam, there appear to be ‘special groups’. Regarding one such ‘special group’, namely the jurists, the author suggests that they ‘are authoritative not because they are in authority [...] but because of the perception of being authorities on the set of instructions [...] that point to God’s Way.’ (Abou El Fadl 2001:53). According to such a definition rooted in perceived authoritativeness, some of the teachers and senior students in the Madrasatul Niswa would qualify as authorities, because they view themselves in such a way when reflecting on their social roles. In addition, some of the older students told me that they were ascribed authority in Islamic matters by their respective surroundings. Their stories suggested that especially students and teachers from rural backgrounds are often seen as authorities in Islamic matters, owing to which other women seemed to approach them regularly for advice. To borrow from Abou El Fadl’s cluster of definitions, the young women’s authority is persuasive rather than coercive, since the students and teachers operate within the realm of belief rather than in the realm of real existing power relations.

Abou El Fadl mentions that an authority should possess five characteristics, but in line with my earlier point of criticism I would like to point out that when beliefs and principles are absolute, such conditions attached to the notion of authority are rendered meaningless. In other words, if there is no choice but to believe and to abide, it is irrelevant whether the person who tells me to do so is honest, diligent, comprehensive, reasonable, and self-restrained. At best, I may hope he or she would be any of the above. Even though the author attempts to defend the above five contingencies as ‘rational necessities’ (Abou El Fadl 2001:57), a possible counter argument is that power can corrupt and overrule such necessities dictated by reason, especially when being in power represents a desirable end in itself. Regarding the above concern, even Abou El Fadl has to admit that ‘paternalism’ does emerge, since in the case of specialists such as the jurists the economy of knowledge tends to be tilted in their favour. After all, it is those who have versus those who have not (Abou El Fadl 2001:62). Because authority is presented as plural and as ascribed in a dialectic process with both text and laity/audience involved, the study introduces the reader to a plurality of opinions and authorities, even with regard to the question who is an authority. Returning to the example of the Madrasatul Niswa once again, in the case of badi appa she is both an authority and in authority. As the Principal of the madrasa, the Manager’s wife, and the Founder’s daughter she can
enforce certain things by virtue of her position, or in other words since she is in authority. In addition, she is considered an authority, as she is perceived to be the most learned among the young women.

Apart from relying on self-definitions and perceptions, other sources suggest that bodily practice represents another angle from which the concept of authority can be examined. In *Formations of the Secular*, Asad's discussion of the sacred draws upon Bourdieu's earlier mentioned habitus, which is defined as bodily and sensory experiences of the divine and as faith lived through bodily practice. Linking habitus with the notion of authority gives rise to questions such as how attitudes of personal responsibility are formed by associating bodily experience with authority, or how notions of authority are shaped by the ways in which people explain their bodily experiences and practices, and finally how authority is reproduced socially and contested through discourse. In keeping with the above approach to the concept of authority, the stories of the young women in the Madrasatul Niswan point out certain 'economies of pain' expressed through bodily practice, which appear to play a central role for the habitus in the madrasa. The pain and the degree to which the young women identify with it resound in the earlier mentioned taranas and naat, which mourn the passing of the Prophet's times and express an almost painful longing to emulate both the Prophet and his times. Such repeated experiences of relived pain, paired with the discipline of learning how to sing the tunes and how to move the body along with them, have a physical aspect to them that adds depth and value to the practice. While the pain is relived and reproduced exclusively by women, owing to which it is gender specific, the pain's cultural meanings are highly specific too, because they are rooted in the beliefs and principles of this particular Muslim community. These underlying beliefs and principles marking the habitus in turn are instilled in the young women through their studies and their way of life in the madrasa. Habitus, defined as faith lived through bodily practice, is a valuable concept with a view to trying to discern how authority is reproduced in the madrasa. In everyday discourse, bodily experience tends to be explained with reference to hadith and sunnah, as we saw in the example of the role of dreams in the previous chapter. The same holds for the overall tone in the Madrasatul Niswan, since great emphasis is laid on references to hadith and sunnah, as we saw in the examples of the lessons in adab in the previous chapter. While Asad's discussion of habitus in relation to the notion of the sacred helps to shed light on certain aspects of authority encountered in the shape of bodily practice in the Madrasatul Niswan, the question how authority is reproduced socially and
contested through discourse is less meaningful for this study, as authority appears to be mainly reproduced rather than contested. Borrowing from Mahmood’s definition of docility once again, the young women’s ‘willingness to be taught’ seems to be more important than debate.

Reminding of the spiritual outlook of the Tablighi Jamaat with its strong emphasis on virtues (fazail) rather than on legal questions (masail), for the young women in the Madrasatul Niswan the emulation of the Prophet’s time seemed to rank higher than trying to find ways to become a mufti. In addition, my observations indicate that (for the time being) the students and teachers appear to view themselves outside the scope of such discussions. Still, claims to authority were made in different respects in the Madrasatul Niswan. As we saw earlier, the Founder and Manager claimed to follow the standardized madrasa curriculum known as the dars-e-nizami, because the implementation thereof gives the institution authority. Furthermore, the alimat and fazilat degrees associated with the students’ graduation are derived from the authoritative madrasa degrees issued for young men.

To conclude, even though initially I was looking for an emancipatory reinterpretation of Islamic law as the most visible marker for an emerging female authority in Islamic matters, according to Mahmood this represents a typical ‘pitfall’, and moreover such a reinterpretation does not seem to take place in the Madrasatul Niswan as yet. One possible explanation is that such a reinterpretation is not what the young women want to achieve, because in line with the above reflections they may not perceive the legal domain as problematic or oppressive. Moreover, we should keep in mind that the young women only learn about Islamic law to the extent that the curriculum permits it. In other words, they study only those sections of books on Islamic law that are deemed important for them to know according to those in charge of setting the curriculum. Taking into account relations between power and gender in the Madrasatul Niswan, the power to define and regulate correct practice mainly rests with the men in authority – in other words with the Founder, Manager, and, to a lesser extent, with the women close to them. Apart from the question whether an emancipatory reinterpretation of Islamic law can be discerned, we heard the views of one teacher who suggested that the madrasa graduates were only supposed to make use of their knowledge at the informal level and strictly for personal use. Finally, with regard to the question of female religious authority, Muslim intellectuals interested in madrasa education frequently voiced the suggestion that for such authority to emerge, exposure to alternative forms of education and learning methods may be necessary. Such an exposure could take the
shape of alternative forms of education grounded in a broader knowledge base prior to enrolment in a madrasa, post-graduation programmes similar to the work of the Markazul Maarif described in Chapter 2, or one could imagine the emergence of more ‘dual type’ girls’ madrasas like the Jamiatul Zehra introduced in the previous chapter.

1. As a reply to my following question how and among whom they intended to do tabligh or missionary work, the students said that they wanted to do tabligh among the women of their respective communities.


3. In *The Veil Unveiled*, Faegheh Shirazi analyzes and deconstructs multiple layers of meaning of the veil or hijab. She notes that ‘To delimit the meanings of the veil is indeed a challenging if not impossible task. [...] while the veil in the Hindi movie serves to draw the male gaze, the veil in the Iranian movie serves to deny the male gaze. [...] Whereas Muslims use the veil to safeguard women from men outside the family, Hindus use the same devices to enforce women’s subordination to their in-laws.’ (Shirazi 2001:175). Apart from emphasizing different uses of the veil, she points out that ‘On the one hand, the veil is a simple garment that millions of women deal with in their daily lives as a matter of habit, without a second thought. […] On the other hand, the veil is an enormously important symbol, as it carries thousands of years of religious, sexual, social, and political significance within its folds.’ (Shirazi 2001:180).

4. Compare this also to how Talal Asad in his *Formations of the Secular* refers to the modern Western public sphere as a space of social exclusions. For effective representation of the excluded minorities to take place, a decentred pluralism would be necessary (Asad 2003:177), which however is contrary to the elites’ interest.

5. Jeffery mentions similar observations with regard to the madrasas’ ‘civilizing mission’ in rural settings, as her interlocutors tended to draw a sharp line between those who were educated in a madrasa and those you were not. Typically, the latter were frowned upon for their improper use of language and immodest dress. In other words, through education people tried to imitate a life style associated with higher class and caste culture (conference paper; Neemrana 2003).

6. Although I spoke with more women than those represented in the following sections, I selected their cases as each of them illustrates one or more of the above-mentioned linkages between purdah, the nexus between agency and discipline, and public presence.
7. Barbara Metcalf points out that the use of appa or sister indicates a certain simplicity of discourse, while at the same time emotional warmth is expressed through this fictive relationship (Metcalf 2000:51). Moreover, the address ‘badi appa’ suggests that the authority of this young woman seemed to depend as much on her status as it did on her knowledge and personal efforts.

8. I am grateful to Patricia Jeffery for pointing out that according to an Archaeological Survey of India report on Nizamuddin, the name of the mosque in question should be Kalan, i.e. ‘great’, mosque instead of the commonly used Kali or ‘black’ mosque.

9. As mentioned before, the Jamiatu s Salehat in Malegaon appears to be the oldest and largest public girls’ madrasa in post-Partition India.

10. Memories of such malpractices are preserved in books like Nazeer Ahmad’s The Bride’s Mirror, wherein a teacher uses her students’ tuition fees for her own good. Instead of teaching the girls who come to her house in pursuit of knowledge, she makes them clear all kinds of household chores. See Ahmad 1903.

11. As the young teachers in the madrasa all wore salwar kameez, i.e. the typical ‘Punjabi style’ lose fitting trousers (salwar) with a matching long or short blouse (kurti or kameez) and scarf (dupatta), most of the girls used to buy the matching fabrics for their outfits as a so-called ‘suit piece’ on the weekly market in Nizamuddin. They stitched the fabrics by hand and often adorned them later on, for example with hand painted floral designs. Mastering the skill of producing these multi shaded floral designs in turn was part of the ‘home science’ classes in the Madrasatul Niswan, along with stitching suits by hand, and embroidery.

12. Generally speaking, in India the relationship between the new bride or bahu and her mother-in-law is charged with anxiety. Girls tend to be socialized into anticipating the hardships of being the new bride in the extended household after marriage. Typically, the new bride is expected to be demure and shy, enduring the plotting of the other sister-in-laws and meeting demands to work harder than everyone else, while constantly being criticized on the part of the mother-in-law. The bahu’s role in the extended family is the topic of much popular culture in India, such as daily soap operas about the conflicts between bahu and mother-in-law or saas.

13. Paranthe are stuffed and fried breads that are often served for breakfast and considered to be quite heavy. When my mother-in-law suffered a stroke and was hospitalized, upon hearing which hospital she was in the same teacher immediately pointed out that her favourite egg paranthe stalls were right in front of the hospital, recalling the many occasions when she had gone there.

14. While the traditional blouse-like garment referred to as kurta extends down to the knees or even further and is loosely cut, it is considered fashionable to wear fitted kurtas and/or a much shorter version of the kurta called kurti, which barely covers the thighs.
15. It deserves mention that the motto ‘know thy enemy’ also represents an important strategy in the work of the Tablighi Jamaat, where it is justified as a means to increase the efficiency of their dawah or call to faith.

16. Although this may hold equally for other female family members, in my opinion the wives probably suffer most from the men’s struggle, as the relationship with their partner has such a deep bearing on them in terms of their self-esteem, their status within the family, and their position in the wider social context.

17. For example, out of fourteen girls studying in the second year, one girl came from Bijnor, one from Saharanpur, one from Lucknow, one from Barabanki, another one from as far south as Mumbai, and the remaining nine girls were from Delhi. Similarly, in a third year section, out of sixteen students two girls were from Bijnor and one girl was from Lucknow. For those who had come to the madrasa from far away places, the only time they got to see their families was during the main vacations in May/June and following the month of ramzan. Although monthly visits home were allowed, for those whose families lived far away an extended weekend was generally too short to visit them. Keeping in mind that Delhi is a vast city, even most students ‘from Delhi’ were boarders. Apart from the girls belonging to the ‘core families’ in Nizamuddin, most of the students from other areas in Delhi were not in a position to commute daily, because of the costs associated with travelling and because of safety reasons. As stated in the Admission Papers (see Appendix I), the boarders were allowed regular contact with their parents over the phone ‘during set timings’ and for no longer than three minutes at a stretch. As a result, it was a frequent sight to find girls crying because they were homesick, although public displays of emotions tended to be frowned upon.

18. It deserves mention that with regard to such ‘permissions’, the word ijazā was often used. While ijazā is generally used for a particular certificate issued by a teacher for a student, who is then allowed to teach the same book to others, in Urdu ijazā is also used as a formula for taking leave, or denoting the permission to do something, issued by a person considered authoritative, such as parents, teachers, the Principal, etc.

19. The same teacher pointed out that Aligarh Muslim University and the Qaramat College in Lucknow recognize the degree issued by the Jamia Noorul Islam as equal to the ‘10+2’ secondary graduation. By contrast, the Jamia Millia Islamia in Malegaon is recognized as equal to a BA, due to the different standards of the Maharashtrian Board for Secondary Education. According to her, most graduates of the Jamia Noorul Islam continue to study Arabic or Islamic Studies, or they seek admission for the so-called Bachelor of Unani Medicines.

20. In order to appreciate how much this statement set her apart from the other students, we should keep in mind that in this community all non-religious and especially all Western music is forbidden, along with films, novels, and things such as photographs or other modes of depicting human beings, as we saw before.
21. With regard to the above observation, Brown suggests that 'raising sunnah to a place of virtual equality with the Qur'an [sic] was one means of protecting the organic link between the two sources' (Brown 1996:17). Furthermore, the rank of prophecy in Islamic thought makes people turn to sunnah for guidance in times of challenges and changes, thus rendering it a 'symbol of authority' (Brown 1996:138). Weighing the textual sources against each other is also the premise for the questions 'How does God speak?' and 'Who speaks for God,' which are claimed to be central to contemporary struggles for the right to represent Prophetic authority (Brown 1996:133). According to the same author, herein also lies the strength of revivalist movements, as they 'promise to bring Islam back to life' (Brown 1996:141).