From behind the curtain: a study of girls' madrasa in India
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6 Girls’ madrasas revisited

Following the discussion of the emergence of girls’ madrasas in India, the specific social and ideological background to the madrasa I did fieldwork in, its curriculum in comparison with the curriculum taught in madrasas for boys, and the future trajectories of the female graduates, I would now like to highlight and summarize my main findings. While initially I was looking for markers of emancipation, it turned out that in order to appreciate the education provided by the Madrasatul Niswan, the notion of empowerment did not prove to be helpful. The centrality of discipline adab or value education reminded of late nineteenth century reformist ideas and influenced by the informal linkages with the Tablighi Jamaat, the men in charge saw the reform (islah) of personal life as the primary educational aim. As a result, even though the young women in the Madrasatul Niswan were knowledgeable with regard to Islamic theology, the internalization of a certain discipline and values associated with adab seemed to prevent them from developing the confidence to apply the acquired knowledge outside the teaching profession. Instead, the Madrasatul Niswan appeared to aim primarily at the reproduction of a relatively closed community with its particular worldview. Moreover, the informal affiliation with the Tablighi Jamaat also ensured the reproduction of tablighi ideas, because the curriculum of the Madrasatul Niswan, and the weekly Thursday Programme in particular, emphasized the importance of cultivating certain virtues (fazail) with a view to the Hereafter over questions related to Islamic law (masail).

As the informal linkages with the Tablighi Jamaat were examined at length in the previous chapters, I would now like to briefly discuss the Tablighi Jamaat’s role in relation to gender. The Tablighi Jamaat’s founder is remembered to encourage women to work, and from the time of its inception the organization advocated the sameness of the sexes (Metcalf 2000:54-55). By contrast, my findings indicate that in the Madrasatul Niswan men were by and large in charge of women’s lives by virtue of their roles as guardians and decision makers regarding most aspects of the young women’s lives, while the teachers and students lived in seclusion, as they observed a particularly strict form of purdah. With regard to gender, Metcalf’s argument concerning the inversion of gender roles in the Tablighi Jamaat deserves qualification. Although the male staff cooked food for the young women in the madrasa and looked after everyday affairs, the inversion of gender roles
appears to be of a temporary and rather limited nature. Similarly, in the case of the Tablighi Jamaat the inversion of roles mainly seems to play a role when men are travelling 'in the path of God', or whenever women organize meetings for other women. Rather than representing an inversion of gender roles, the above examples seem to be the result of a range of disciplinary mechanisms. By the same token, the tablighi ideology, as found in tablighi literature available on the topic of women in the broadest sense, does not appear to promote an egalitarian outlook. In the words of Sikand, 'Through the lectures of the muballighin [tablighi volunteers, M.W.] and tablighi elders and through numerous tablighi-type texts an attempt is made constantly to communicate and reinforce the image of what is regarded as model Islamic womanhood' (Sikand n.d.:10). This ideal is by and large informed by Deobandi ideas regarding women's social roles and the concept of modesty, as we saw with regard to Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar and in examples taken from the genre of value-oriented (adab) literature in Chapter 4. Elaborating on the point of gender roles, a tablighi activist states that 'Domestic work alone is the proper sphere for women. [...] Her spare time she should spend in zikr and namaz and in counting her rosary (tasbih). [...]’ (Sikand n.d.:14). The above description reminds of my observations among the young women in the Madrasatul Niswan, who seemed to have internalized the above ideal of Islamic womanhood to varying extents.

Apart from the cluster of adab literature, the Tablighi Jamaat's Fazail-e-Amal (Virtues of Everyday Actions) is prescribed for daily reading in the Madrasatul Niswan. Masud points out that the Fazail-e-Amal represents a piece of 'ethnic literature' (Masud 2000:83). After all the Virtues of Everyday Actions were written in a particular setting, which was distinctly Indian, town-based, and using the madrasa idiom (Masud 2000:83). Another observation indicates that while in the early twentieth century many believed that the West had achieved perfection and that progress meant to follow the ways of the West, the Tablighi Jamaat established the emulation of the life of the Prophet as the ideal (Masud 2000:86). As we saw in Chapter 4, a set of literature emerged in the intellectual milieu of the Tablighi Jamaat that highlights women's moral qualities at the hand of examples taken from the history of Islam. Although especially in the case of Aisha women's intellectual accomplishments tend to be mentioned as markers of progress, they are mainly noted in the margins signifying the ideal conditions during the time of the Prophet. As being knowledgeable seems to be mainly viewed from a moral angle, knowledge does not appear to represent a value in itself in the Madrasatul Niswan, nor does being knowledgeable seem to be acknowledged as a
pivotal aspect of the young women’s identities. Within such an interpretive framework, being an accomplished savant is reduced to possessing a praiseworthy character trait. The young women in turn are socialized into thinking that they can only emulate but not achieve the social standing associated with the female Companions. The formulaic answer to the question why this is so was that times had changed and hence emulation of the ideal was all women could hope to accomplish today.

What is known about the historical examples of learned Muslim women may challenge the above interpretation, as we saw in Chapter 4. One source explicitly mentions that women who narrated hadith form the earliest historical example of women’s careers in Islamic theology, which began at the time of the Prophet and his wives. In addition, it is noted that ‘the teachers wielded considerable social influence in those days and the women teachers shared the prestige and authority enjoyed by the profession’ (Chaudhry 1953:75). In line with the earliest precedents in the history of Islam, the teaching profession still appears to be the most acceptable career choice among women today. Women’s skills as jurists, on the other hand, tend to be mentioned in the margins. Still, the notion of ‘joint authority’ sheds light on the conditions under which women associated with families of religious scholars participated in writing fatwa, or countersigned them along with the more authoritative male family members. Apparently, ‘Some women savants exercised the authority of countersigning legal decrees on points referred to their relations, a father or a husband who functioned as the Mufti of the town’ (Chaudhry 1953:76). As a consequence, ‘The houses of the woman savants transformed themselves into institutions of higher learning for women’ (Chaudhry 1953:84).

Moving on from the early history of Islam, Berkey highlights the same question regarding the learned women of the past from a different angle and within a different time frame, as his findings concern the Mamluk period (twelfth century AD). From the Middle Ages onwards, there are examples of female savants who travelled in pursuit of knowledge, which remind of the examples of teachers in the Madrasatul Niswan, as described in the previous chapters. Since the question under which conditions such travelling in pursuit of knowledge was possible for female savants remains open, the only indicator is once again the emphasis on women’s flawless moral standing, which appears to be prerequisite for women’s participation in the heterosocial public sphere. In other words, apparently the permission to study goes in tandem with the moral qualities a woman should possess (Jawad 1988:207). In the case of the teachers in the Madrasatul Niswan, we noted
that migration in pursuit of knowledge or with a view to taking up a teaching assignment mainly depended on the permission (ijaza) of their guardians. Moreover, being part of the network constituted by the 'core families' appeared to play a significant role as well.

In keeping with Berkey's observations, it is deserves mention that even today many books intended for women are actually addressed at men, as the latter still appear to be widely perceived as responsible for women's education. In addition, due to an 'agenda of submission' informed by certain ideals of Islamic womanhood, women continue to be excluded from certain degrees of learnedness and public function, as we saw in the preceding chapter. The emphasis on studying ahadith in curricula for women, which could also be discerned in the Madrasatul Niswan, is rooted in the early history of Islamic education, as there is a 'history of un-official learnedness' of female teachers who taught the traditions of the Prophet (ahadith) to their male students. Even though the education of these learned women generally took place within an informal setting, historically their informal authority was recognized through the authorizing diplomas they issued (ijazas) and through the chain of authority (isnad) associated with the traditions of the Prophet (ahadith), wherein they were mentioned. Notwithstanding the above, the curriculum for women has been and continues to be different from the curriculum for men in content and in emphasis.

With regard to the madrasa curriculum for girls and its underlying educational aims, the teachers' and students' stories indicate that the ideal of bringing about personal reform, as formulated in the Madrasatul Niswan's admission papers, may or may not tally with life outside the madrasa. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether more comprehensive ideals such as those mentioned in Chapter 4 are realized in the Madrasatul Niswan. Just to briefly recall, one author argued that 'she [the woman, M.W.] is under a moral and religious obligation to seek knowledge, develop her intellect, broaden her outlook, cultivate her talents and then utilize her potential to the benefit of her soul and of her society' (Jawad 1988:205). While the basic obligation to seek knowledge is met by enrolling in the Madrasatul Niswan, the broadening of the students' outlook, the cultivation of the young women's talents, and above all the utilization of their potential to whatever aim, represent aspects of education that do not seem to be valorized that much as yet. A point of criticism directed at the curricula of boys' madrasas in Pakistan is that 'they [the commentaries, M.W.] have to be learned by heart which makes students use only their memory not their analytical powers [...] the assumption on which the Dars [i.e. the dars-e-nizami, M.W.] functions is that
the past was a golden age in which all that was best has already been written. What remains to the modern age is merely to preserve it' (Rahman 2004:5). Taylor views the phenomenon of 'looking back' as something practised at a broader scale when noting that 'generally, we still draw on the old images of higher times in our political life. We think of our founders as giants, living in a heroic age' (Taylor 1992:225). The above reflections also help to shed light on Nadwi's selective (re)reading of female role models such as Aisha, as we saw in Chapter 4, and the ensuing heavy emphasis on moral rather than scholarly achievement, on piety rather than competitiveness, and on reproduction over innovation or critical reading.

Regarding the question why pedagogical innovation may sit uncomfortably with those in charge of setting the curriculum in the Madrasatul Niswan, one possible explanation is the lurking fear that the only alternative to the known vistas would be to adopt a Western model with all its perceived negative consequences. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that for the founders, teachers, and students their identity as Muslims in a minority situation appeared to be central to their self-definitions. As Patricia Jeffery points out with regard to the people associated with the Nizamuddin shrine, comparatively speaking their Muslim identity was much more important than it may have been for other Muslim artisans of a similar class/caste background in the same area, because being a Muslim represented the pivotal facet of their existence. Similarly, for the teachers in the Madrasatul Niswan being a good Muslim stood synonymous for social capital, because their daily income depended on their piety.

Besides assuming that an emancipatory reinterpretation of the texts studied may not have been perceived as necessary on the part of the teachers and students, another possible explanation is that there might be conscious efforts not to let this happen on the part of those in authority. Within the power structure of the Madrasatul Niswan we saw that the restricted curriculum set by the Founder served a particular purpose, namely the reproduction of the community’s worldview with its ideals of what it means to be a good Muslim woman. With a view to accomplishing the above, we noted the curriculum’s focus on the traditions of the Prophet, through which role models for women are discerned, along with literature from the value-oriented genre referred to as adab. As a result, where the past is seen as perfect, reinterpretation or seeking out new vistas may be perceived as futile activities. Similarly, because authority is primarily thought to be outside the self, exteriorized to the extent of being exclusively found in the precedents of the Prophet and his Companions, there did not seem to be a self-
reflective discourse on authority. Nevertheless, the young women seemed to be content believing that their studies, teaching, and finally also their way of life represented complete dedication to Islam. Moreover, we cannot afford to lose sight of the difference between rural and urban environments, which also account for divergent views concerning the question of female authority in Islamic matters. In rural areas, where women have less access to authority regarding Islamic matters, the madrasa students were often readily accepted as authorities on Islam, as we saw in the previous chapters. In addition, Muslim intellectuals, along with others who considered themselves concerned with the project of madrasa education for girls, provided yet another perspective on the question of authority. Those not directly involved in madrasa education appeared to be convinced that within a generation or so learned young women from the girls’ madrasas would challenge the established authority of the ulama.

Although the founders, the members of the ‘core families’, and most of the students in the madrasa came from a lower caste background, the tone set by the all-pervading presence of adab was adopted from the high caste and court culture. In other words, for the students from lower to lower-middle class backgrounds, rural areas, and/or lower castes, the madrasa’s educational outlook and moral ideals provided an opportunity to re-orient themselves with the aim of becoming upwardly mobile. For example, we learned about cases where upward social mobility was achieved through taking up teaching as a profession after graduation, while for others receiving education as such meant upward social mobility. Other stories hinted at the parents’ hopes that by grooming their daughters into the ways of the higher castes, they would eventually have better marriage prospects. Under the influence of the late nineteenth century reformist ideas and similar to what happened in the aftermath of Partition in 1947, many lower caste Muslims then and now may see a chance to become upwardly mobile by imitating the higher castes, by inventing high caste ancestry, by denying convert backgrounds, and finally by claiming ancestry from outside India. Possibly with a view to accumulating social and cultural capital, adab set the tone for interaction in the Madrasatu l Niswan, which the students internalized through the cultivation of the community’s adopted high caste habitus.

The cases briefly introduced in the previous chapters suggest that the girls’ social standing as learned women is at times acknowledged and sometimes negated by the students’ and teachers’ surroundings. While the young women are generally well informed with regard to rights and obligations pertaining to women, the fine balance between Islamic beliefs and
influences perceived as 'Western' also gives rise to tensions in the domestic field. Similarly, even though the official curriculum of the Madrasatul Niswan does not appear embracing when it comes to the non-Islamic component of Indian culture, what the students do outside the madrasa may be a different story altogether, as we saw in the examples of students participating in Hindu festivals in Chapter 4. The above tensions indicate that despite the conservative worldview, which the Madrasatul Niswan seeks to promote there is space for deviation from the seemingly all-pervading discipline.

Viewing the madrasa in its wider social context, the discussion of the public sphere in Chapter 5 suggests that the Madrasatul Niswan constitutes a counterpublic in its own right. Calhoun alerts us that 'we must ask not just on what thematic content it [the public sphere, M.W.] focuses but also how it is internally organized, how it maintains its boundaries and relatively greater internal cohesion in relation to the larger public, and whether its separate existence reflects merely sectional interests, some functional division of labour, or a felt need for bulwarks against the hegemony of a dominant ideology' (Calhoun 1992:58). Taking up some of the above points, the Madrasatul Niswan represents a relatively closed, self-sufficient community structure that appears to reproduce itself through the formal and informal curricula. Contrary to processes involving the bracketing of differences, markers of identity, and inequalities, the Madrasatul Niswan promotes a habitus that is based on a particular social identity. This identity, in turn, is rooted in the community's interpretation of what it means to be a good Muslim woman, which is a total concept that includes practices of female seclusion, codes of dress and language, along with the internalization of the community's definition of what it means to lead a correct inner life marked by the constant strive for perfection. In addition, the Madrasatul Niswan represents a particular sort of community, as it resembles a 'closet' community (Taylor 1992:225). While using the social imagery of the ummah, the call for reform is strictly personal, and so are the (personal) rewards for the Hereafter. While the social component serves as a reminder at the moral level, reform is aimed at in the personal realm. In Taylor's words: 'improving devotional books were meant to be read and their contents internalized by each person [...] the utility of printing was that it could make possible the wide diffusion of these practices of interiorization [...] but the "Religion of the Closet" didn't depend for its practice in each individual case on the fact that it was probably being followed in hundreds, even thousands of other homes' (Taylor 1992:225).

With regard to the reproduction of a closed community like the Madrasatul Niswan, the question why parents send their children to a madrasa is often raised. With a view to countering the many stereotypical ideas related
to madrasa education and violence, it is important to acknowledge that parents are generally driven by the wish to give their children a good education. Rather than suspecting forms of violence, aggression, and force to be the order of the day, we ought to consider that parents who send their children to a madrasa generally do not seek admission to see their children turn into terrorists or jihadis, but to give them what they think is the best education possible for them (Philip n.d.:1). In the Madrasatul Niswan, most students in turn appeared to be content with their parents’ decision. When I asked a student from Bijnor why she had come to Delhi instead of attending a girls’ madrasa closer to home, she said that she knew the Madrasatul Niswan was the ‘best’ madrasa. Asking the same question in a group of third year students, they answered that they studied in a madrasa to please Allah, to work for their faith, and to save the world from going to Hell by doing tabligh. Although the scope of education may be limited and one-sided in some respects, my findings suggest that in the case of the Madrasatul Niswan the frequently noted stereotype that students learn without understanding is not the rule either. Still, as the teachers are often insufficiently trained to provide a broader outlook, not much didactic innovation can be expected with regard to encouraging more critical thinking, which however may hold for any other type of school as well. In that regard, Barbara Metcalf points out that organizations such as the Tablighi Jamaat are not alone in India to promote ‘cultural encapsulation’ (Sikand 2002:1).

Viewed from a different perspective, ‘running such a large number of madrasas is perhaps the largest community effort by any single community in any part of the world in the field of education […]’ (Philip n.d.:4). In other words, even if despite its strive for recognition the Madrasatul Niswan is not successful at becoming a vocal member of the ‘official’ public sphere, being part of the larger project of providing Islamic education for those who would otherwise not receive education at all makes it an important effort in the realm of civil society. In Barbara Metcalf’s words: ‘literacy is good, schooling is good – even if this is not modernity’ (Sikand 2002:1).

To conclude, girls’ madrasas like the Madrasatul Niswan seek to teach young women Islamic knowledge, manners, and ethics, which the participants in the discourse generally perceive to be unavailable or neglected otherwise. However, the notion of empowerment is problematic, as Mahmood points out, because it is often dictated by an agenda written by those who subscribe to the linkage between feminism, agency, and power (Mahmood 2001:203). Searching for a such a political agenda represents a pitfall, because in the course of looking for ‘revolutionary’ indicators, such as signs of change and progress, one tends
to lose sight of other forms of agency found in the continuation of a discourse of piety, modesty, and submission – be it in new ways. In a context wherein docility, redefined in Mahmood’s argument as the ‘willingness to be taught’ (Mahmood 2001:209), and the cultivation of a pious self in continuity with an Islamic discourse that valorizes subordination to a transcendent will and by consequence often also to male authority are seen as ideals, agency defined as resistance to such relations of domination is not a helpful concept. In keeping with Mahmood’s findings concerning the Egyptian mosque movement, in the Madrasatul Niswan the cultivation of a modest and pious self seems to represent the ideal. Those who participate in the discourse perceive Islam as an individual and collective practice of embodied pious living, and the young women indicated in many ways that they do get something valuable out of their education, namely the prospect of upward social mobility through education, better marriage prospects, the option of taking up the teaching profession, and finally the accumulation of religious merit for themselves and for their families.

1. Note that Masud’s criticism of the Tablighi Jamaat is threefold: (1) the Tablighi Jamaat’s agenda reduces Islam to an aversion toward modernity; (2) Islam is reduced to the personal and ritualistic level (Masud 2000:31), and (3) the distinction between virtues (fazail) and questions pertaining to Islamic law (masail), along with the strong emphasis on the former served to circum-navigate problems of sectarianism (Masud 2000:103).

2. With regard to the admiration for the time of the Prophet I observed that the majority of the Madrasatul Niswan’s students and teachers, and especially those belonging to the ‘core families’, were named after the Prophet’s wives and female Companions.

3. Owing to conversations with Patricia Jeffery I was aware that in rural Bijnor some madrasas hosted separate sections for girls and that some maulvis intended to open similar girls’ madrasas.