



BOOK REVIEW

Secluded Scholars Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India

Gail Minault

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Review : ○ Rehana Ghadially

Unlike the study of Hindu South Asia, that of South Asian Islam and Muslim communities has received scant attention from western scholars. Minault's book provides a much needed corrective as she sets herself the arduous task of rendering invisible women visible, thereby giving Muslim women their place in history. The Muslim community in India is diverse, and Minault chooses to concentrate on the Urdu-speaking, Sharif section of both the Sunni and Shia sects. The choice results in a focus on north India, Bhopal in central India, and the Nizam's territories. The book also includes Urdu-speaking Muslims of Bengal and western India.

As one goes through the book, one is impressed by the amount of data, when one previously thought that little or no reform efforts existed. The author describes her search for this data as a "personal odyssey", and an odyssey it is for the author leaves no stone unturned. The end result is an enlightening and scholarly piece of work. The period from the mid-19th to the early 20th century was a crucial one for Muslim social reform. It threw up forces that reassessed the status of women and set in motion the movement for female education.

Missionary and government efforts aside, the agents of change

within the Muslim community included men from the landed aristocracy, the gentry in colonial employment, religious scholars, political and nationalist leaders, and women who benefitted from their menfolk's initial efforts. Ostensibly, the efforts were on behalf of all Muslim women. The beneficiaries, however, were women of the same background as the reformist men.

The efforts of these men may be broadly classified into two categories. One is literary, and includes the use of the printed word to make the idea of female education palatable. The second is more action-oriented. Both approaches were male-dominated though women did play a role in them.

The first three chapters of Minault's book indicate the role of the Urdu press in spreading ideas of change, both educational and social, in north India. The creation of a suitable literature, reformist in vision, was seen as a task necessary for instructing women on enlightened directions. Women belonging to the gentry were getting a vernacular education at home—*Koran* reading in Arabic, reading of elementary Persian texts and some teaching of Urdu—but given their declining resources, this kind of home education was difficult to maintain.

The first generation of reformers articulated an ideology of educational

and social reform for their class and community, shaped not just by the loss of Muslim power and the advent of British rule but by the moral decline of their religious tradition. The representatives of this generation of reformers included Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Nazir Ahmad and Altaf Husain Hali. The last two wrote the novels, *Mirat-ul-Arus* (The Bride's Mirror) and *Majalis un-Nissa* (Assemblies of Women) respectively, highlighting the backwardness and decay of middle class families. The strategy was to portray two kinds of women through their fictional heroines: one who is skilful, frugal, a model homemaker, wise, respectful of elders and sensitive to social relations, in contrast to the woman who is a shrew and steeped in wasteful customs and superstition. The moral of their stories was that women should be educated because they are the managers of the home, responsible for the training of their children and essential for preserving the family in times of rapid social change. One wonders about the identity of the readers of these works as few women could read Urdu, which was the language of literature at the time.

The fictional heroines had their real-life counterparts in Azizunnissa Begam and the Begam of Bhopal, who had received instruction in Arabic and

elementary Persian at home. Texts, guides, journals and related didactic literature in the tradition of Ahmad and Hali continued to be produced for the instruction of women. The two most important contributions were Ashraf Ali Thanavi's *Bihisti Zavar* (Ornaments of Paradise) and Sayyid Mumtaz Ali's *Huqum un-Niswan* (Women's Rights). The second was a slim volume as compared to Thanavi's encyclopedic work, which was a bigger success, emphasizing rules governing proper Islamic behaviour, household management and individual piety. The delineation of proper behaviour was directed at women, and it was only as an afterthought that scriptural standards that applied to men were added.

Mumtaz Ali was ahead of his time in using the word "rights". Trained as he was in an Islamic curriculum, he had received no western education. He argued for a broad humanistic education which would do away with custom and superstition and increase awareness of women's rights under Islam, as against their rights derived from their more narrowly conceived domestic functions. His work was, however, received with apathy and hostility. Living in a society, segregated on the basis of gender, having access to the world of only the women of their family, these writers nevertheless offer a deep insight into the life of the *zenana*—the *begamat* language, the customs and habits of the women. Though a rich literature was produced, Minault makes only a passing reference to how this literature was received both by women and men.

The Urdu women's magazines played a very important role in structuring reform strategies. For the first time women were involved in literary activities. There were initiatives at several places. Minault chooses to describe three of them—*Tahzib un-Niswan* in Lahore,

produced by Mumtaz Ali and his wife Muhammadi Begam; *Khatun*, produced by Shaikh Abdullah and his wife Wahid Jahan Begam in Aligarh; and *Ismat*, produced by Rashid ul Khairi in Delhi. Though the ideals remain household seclusion and status enhancement, the main thrust was that educated women would be better managers of the domestic realm, helpmates to their husbands, and nurturers and tutors of the young. Thus, there was a need for women to know the scriptures, their rights and duties under Islam, and to discriminate between worthless customs and superstitions, and true religion. The aim of all reform ventures during this period was that of perfecting women, into better wives, mothers and Muslims.

Writing was followed by the actual work of getting reform efforts off the ground. The second half of Minault's book covers this. Across the country, men's *anjumans* (associations) started to take up the cause of women's education. These *anjumans* were set up in Lahore, Mumbai, Aligarh and Hyderabad and one outside India, in London. Their members spoke at various fora, debated and discussed policies, raised funds, lobbied with the government, and so on.

Minault gives examples of how leading families worked in this area and provided patronage, and of the role of the womenfolk in furthering the cause. Unlike the writers and religious scholars, the men of the time were western-educated professionals belonging to the middle class. While the written word challenged ignorance, superstition and custom, the effort to start *anjumans* was motivated by several factors: the compulsion to resist Christianity, the progress made by Hindus on this front, and the need for educated brides for educated Muslim men. It is from the latter class that women's *anjumans* arose. Women in

the 20th century emerged as agents shaping their own destiny and took the lead in starting primary schools in their localities.

Once women took charge of their lives, new debates about *pardah*, pronouncements against polygamy and related reforms in Islamic law became prominent. These became topics of discussion at *anjuman* meetings. However, the decision to leave *pardah* altogether was familial rather than individual. Minault provides a list of women from well known families, with a history of reform culture, coming out of *pardah*, with Atiya Fyzee in Mumbai taking the lead. While education was meant for community progress, discarding *pardah* was presented as a movement for the sake of national progress. In this period, relaxation of *pardah* among women from other than reformist families was not the result of resolutions passed in *anjumans* but, rather, on account of the growing participation of women in political movements and the growth in their education.

A reform as transformatory as education results in a backlash. However, the opposition to female education—its nature and form—is not dealt with in any detail. Even so, the book is a significant contribution to the understanding of South Asian Muslim women.

A few more words. The Sunni Muslims had no organized clergy to pass a *fatwa* on female education. And so it remained a matter of initiative on the part of the male family members, which perhaps explains why it was so slow in taking off. In certain Shia sects, an edict from the spiritual head was sufficient to give a jump start to female education. Minault has provided us with an excellent beginning. Efforts of non-Urdu-speaking Muslims, especially those in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bengal and Bombay, now await research and documentation. □