

In Good Company: Comments

Usha Sanyal

This article is part of Darakhshan Khan's larger body of work on women in the Tablighī Jamā'at, who, as she argues persuasively, have not been given the scholarly attention they deserve (barring a few notable exceptions, among them Metcalf 2000). Khan observes that the reasons for this range from the fact that the public image of the Tablighī Jamā'at is that of itinerant males, not females, and that gender segregation in South Asian Muslim communities makes women invisible to male scholars. Moreover, in today's post-9/11 world the Tablighī Jamā'at is often viewed through the lens of counter-terrorist concerns.

Khan's article revolves around several key themes: the geographical mobility of Muslim bureaucrats in late nineteenth-century British India; changes in the structure of the family; changing patterns of religious leadership in British India, resulting in part from the creation of seminaries such as the Dār al-'Ulūm, Deoband; and the incorporation of Muslim women in religious leadership roles in Tablighī networks from the mid-twentieth century onward. The article seems to fall into two distinct parts. The first half deals with Muslim men from *ashraf* families working in British Indian government jobs in the late nineteenth century who moved constantly (with their wives and children) in response to bureaucratic postings, living westernized lives at the margins of highly stratified British Indian social networks. Drawing on sources ranging from Urdu literature to biographies, Khan shows how isolating this was for the wives and sometimes professionally disappointing for the husbands. The second half of the article deals with Muslim religious elites and their more limited geographical travels in British India in pursuit of religious knowledge, often coinciding with

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familial networks. What unites the two halves of the essay is Khan's interest in Tablighī women and how they fit into this broader historical context. She contends that "the possibility of social and geographic mobility that changed the structure of the household and the texture of local communities [in the late nineteenth century] also enabled women to perform da'wat."

Khan argues that the long-term social effect of employment in British government administrative positions was to deprovincialize Muslim families, such that class and "caste" (the categories of Sayyid, Pathan, and so on) became more important determinants in marriage considerations than regional affiliation. Second, the family itself came to be imagined in terms of nuclear rather than extended kinship. Simultaneously another set of changes was taking place among the ulama, whose establishment of religious seminaries such as Dār al-'Ulūm at Deoband, U.P. resulted in the possibility of social and geographical mobility for young men in the surrounding countryside. The broad result to emerge from this historical context was the delinking of religious knowledge from the landed ulama class. Khan argues that by the early twentieth century, Maulana Thanawi (d. 1943) seemed to have sensed (though his own upbringing and context militated against the emerging trends) that religious knowledge was no longer the preserve of the ulama but had begun to attract "lay" leaders, particularly men from the merchant class. Maulana Ilyas (d. 1944), the founder of the Tablighī Jamā'at, tapped into this emerging social reality by forcefully proposing that the ulama travel to places where the "unreformed" masses lived (specifically in the region of Mewat, today in Haryana and Rajasthan states) rather than remaining ensconced in their seminaries and devotional communities. His key rationale for proposing this was the idea of companionship (*ṣoḥbat*), that is, that personal association with the ulama, who are the religious exemplars of the Prophet's teachings, has transformative value. Although he faced considerable resistance initially, he gained increasing support for the idea. This gave rise in due course, under successive leaders, to the itinerant preacher (*dā'ī*). And in time, women from Tablighī families began to travel to different parts of India as well, to preach the Tablighī message to other women. Unlike the men, though, their activities took place in the privacy of the homes of host families, with full regard to the dictates of *pardah* rules. An emphasis on piety, now delinked from seminary education, allowed this widening of religious leadership and practice to occur.

Khan's analytic and narrative construction of expanding Muslim religious practice in South Asia (and the South Asian diaspora) builds on

current scholarship on South Asian Muslims, and on primary sources in Urdu. I would raise two questions: the first has to do with her reference to conjugality. The article notes that marital relations were transformed as a result of the increased geographical mobility of the Muslim middle class in British India, but this is not the focus of this article. Rather, what Khan points to, in the second half of the essay, is the increased geographical mobility of Tablighī women (not necessarily of the middle class) and the creation of female networks as a result of their travel. If marital relationships in the context of nuclear families were transformed as a result of Tablighī men and women's preaching tours, this is not addressed here. A separate but related question, also not addressed in the essay, is whether the enactment by men of the domestic roles of cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and so on, while on tour, transformed relations between husbands and wives when the men returned home, as Metcalf argues.¹ More generally, how did women's participation in Tablighī tours (*khuruj*) relate to changing concepts of Muslim masculinity and the family?

Second, the term “new infrastructures of piety”, which seems to relate in this context to Tablighī women's local networks, is not explained. Were these infrastructures of piety short-lived, limited to the efforts of particular women such as Sheherbanu Begum, mother of Pakistani diplomat Shaista Suhrawardy (d. 2000), or were they more enduring, the result of multiple women's activities over an extended period of time? What was—and is—the connection between Tablighī women's piety networks and those of the menfolk in their families? Could one reflect on the importance of spaces where women periodically meet, such as the neighborhood community centers, as new “nodes” in such “infrastructures” of piety?

A relatively recent development in South Asia is the burgeoning of madrasa education for Muslim women in many parts of the subcontinent. Religious education for South Asian Muslim women is the subject of new scholarship² and is also the subject of my own current work. Khan's work confirms one general finding on South Asian women's piety movements, including seminary education for women, which is that *maslak* identities (Deobandi, Bareilwi, Tablighī, Jamā'ati, and so on) are being reinforced rather than effaced by women's piety and education. A second finding that seems to be emerging is that the participation of Muslim women in pietistic practice is linked to family and domestic socialization patterns. The reason why many South Asian Muslims of different social classes are beginning to embrace women's religious education is couched in terms of the Muslim adage, “the mother is the child's first madrasa.” Or, as Khan says in her con-

cluding paragraph, “the zimmedar know that women are the best recruiters for the movement.”

Endnotes

- 1 Barbara D. Metcalf, “Tablighi Jama`at and Women,” in *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama`at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal*, ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud (Leiden: Brill, 2000).
- 2 Sadaf Ahmad, *Transforming Faith: The Story of Al-Huda and Islamic Revivalism among Urban Pakistan Women* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009); Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, and Craig Jeffrey, “Aisha, the Madrasah Teacher,” in *Muslim Portraits: Everyday Lives in India*, ed. Mukulika Banerjee (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008), 67-79; Mareike Jule Winkelmann, “From Behind the Curtain”: *A Study of a Girls’ Madrasa in India* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).