South Asia

MAREIKE JULE WINKELMANN

Visiting a Women's Madrasa in Southern India

Can a woman become an *alima*? While there is a vast amount of information and literature on the subject of Muslim men's learning in *madrasas,* this is not the case for the women's religious schools. A visit to a women's *madrasa* called Jamiatul Banaath, located in India's sixth largest city, Hyderabad, is the basis for further research on this topic.

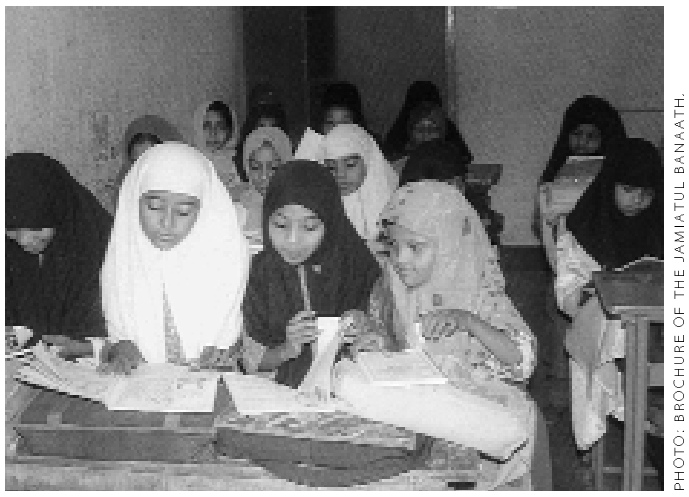

PHOTO: BROCHURE OF THE JAMIATUL BANAATH.

Making an appointment to visit the *madrasa* requires a great deal of patience. For a week, almost every phone call went unanswered, and those that were answered often revealed that the person in charge was absent. On the last possible day, with the help of an editor of the local Urdu newspaper *Siasat*, which is also known for its affiliated educational trust, some goodwill materialized as one of the teachers of the Jamiatul Banaath voiced a welcoming invitation over the phone. While making clear that due to the upcoming exams the students were given a day off, he nonetheless offered a guided tour and a meeting with the faculty members. A long rickshaw drive through one of the more backward areas of Hyderabad followed; and the narrow streets generated anxiety as well as curiosity with a view to this first meeting.

The Jamiatul Banaath is located in a residential area. The already narrow road that leads to the building is flanked by school buses that pick up and bring home those among the more than 1200 students who live in the more far-off areas of the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. The buses look out of place on this particular day, as there are no students around. With a friendly and welcoming smile, one of the teachers offers me a handful of brochures about the school, adding that he would appreciate their distribution abroad, so that people would come to know about the school's mission. He then begins to lead the small group – the rickshaw driver, a reporter of the *Siasat* and myself – on a guided tour. Every now and then a glimpse could be caught of women wearing their *burqa*s and *niqab*s, crossing the extensive inner court in the direction of the staircase. Respectfully and quietly they greet the teachers.

The first stop is the library, where books are stacked in padlocked glass cases. The shelves are filled with numerous Qur'an volumes in Arabic, *hadith* collections, and books on *fiqh* in Arabic and Urdu. This is all there is time to identify, since only moments after entering the cool hall, a veiled woman comes rushing in. Only by her eyes one can tell that she is smiling. The group is urged to go upstairs, in the direction of the staff room, which is situated at the end of the long gallery. On the way, an unveiled woman who is obviously not a student lifts the heavy curtains separating the classrooms from the gallery, allowing us to look inside the small, empty rooms. One of the male teachers kindly lifts the curtain that separates the staff room from the gallery, his gestures stating politely that he has to stay behind. Some of the women who are gathered inside speak English as they point to an empty chair. There is a lot of giggling in the room now, bringing me to the realization of how difficult it is to guess the age of a woman who wears a *niqab*. Apparently the women in the staff room are still very young. This guess is confirmed when a number of them suddenly take off their *niqabs*, exposing their broad smiles to the outsiders. One of their first questions is neither about my name, nor about my home country or profession, but why I, as a foreigner and non-Muslim, am so interested in conducting research on a women's *madrasa*. The question seemed important to them and to me it was a relief that they asked it so directly. Once the young women were given the answer that someone coming from a different cultural and religious background could still be genuinely interested in this project, we went on to talk about the school. The girls can study up to the university level at the Jamiatul Banaath and are awarded the *alima* degree after four years of Islamic studies and the *fazila* degree after two more years. The syllabus encompasses subjects similar to the standardized syllabus of the *madrasas* for men. In other words, the girls study Arabic and Arabic literature, the Qur'an, *tafsir*, the *hadith* traditions and *fiqh,* but in addition to these subjects the teaching includes English as well as 'Home Science' (childcare, sewing and cooking). Most of the teachers are former students of the Jamiatul Banaath.

It seems that the aim of the Jamiatul Banaath is not merely to shape the students into good housewives, caring mothers and good preachers; they are encouraged to take up a profession. One of the main questions in subsequent research will be to what extent this encouragement is limited to a separate female sphere in society. This separate female sphere can be asserted, because in their roles as teachers, doctors and social workers, which seem to be the most prominent professions among young educated Muslim women, they mainly work among other women. ◆

Mareike Jule Winkelmann
is a PhD candidate at the ISIM.
E-mail: mjwinkelmann@hotmail.com