

Informal Links A Girls' Madrasa and Tablighi Jamaat

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During my fieldwork in the Madrasatul Niswan, a girls' madrasa in New Delhi I was struck by its informal links with the lay preachers' movement known as the Tablighi Jamaat. The Madrasatul Niswan was founded in 1996 with the aim of "improving the life of the students," to increase religious consciousness, and to allow for equality of access to religious knowledge, as the founder stated. He was a trained Arabic teacher who taught in the Kashful Uloom madrasa for boys in the nearby headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat.¹ He also opined that there was nothing

The Tablighi Jamaat opposes formal associations with educational institutions. In this article, based upon a fieldwork in a girls' madrasa in New Delhi, Winkelmann argues that a larger network connects that madrasa to the Tablighi Jamaat. This network is based on common areas of origin and the active involvement in the Tablighi Jamaat of the men who are in charge of the madrasa. This is illustrated by the author's analysis of a particular ideal of Islamic womanhood of the Tablighi Jamaat that is part of the curriculum of the madrasa and that is different from their standardized curriculum.

the madrasa curriculum for daily reading throughout the five-year course. Besides the internalization of virtues associated with the lifestyle promoted by the Tablighi Jamaat, the girls were also trained in a particular style of *dawah*, which the students initially practised on me on various occasions. In other words, apart from kinship, the shared worldview influenced by the men's affiliation with the Tablighi Jamaat had brought together this group, and bonds between the families were maintained, reinforced, and extended through arranged marriages

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objectionable about a woman taking up a professional career, provided that she wore a burqa and worked in a gender-segregated environment. As the manager of the madrasa, a graduate of the above-mentioned Kashful Uloom, was his son-in-law, initially it seemed as if it was mainly the men in charge of running the Madrasatul Niswan who were associated with the Tablighi Jamaat.² Over time conversations with the two men indicated that they were part of a larger network, formed by a number of families in the same predominantly Muslim area in New Delhi. This network appeared to be based on common areas of origin and above all the men's active involvement in the Tablighi Jamaat. It extended among the teachers and students, as two out of the fourteen teachers at the time of my fieldwork were maternal cousins, whose female siblings were also enrolled in the Madrasatul Niswan as students or worked there.

Apart from the men in charge of running the madrasa, the students and teachers too referred to the Tablighi Jamaat in various ways. Although they were not actively involved in the tablighi activities, they nevertheless frequently voiced their admiration for the work they observed among the men in their families. At times, the girls' admiration seemed to be paired with a tinge of envy, especially when they talked about how the men in their family regularly travelled "in the path of

God" for the Tablighi Jamaat, as such activities epitomized the mobility, freedom, and excitement the young women were missing in their lives. On many occasions they expressed regret that owing to their observance of an extremely strict form of female segregation or *purdah*,³ activities like travelling were beyond their possibilities. In this particular community, the women not only donned a burqa or ankle-length manteau, combined with the hijab or veil including the *niqab* or face veil, whenever venturing outside the madrasa, as they took pride in adding to the above attire thick socks until above their knees and dark gloves reaching above their elbows. Although the young women were not allowed to participate in the practice of travelling "in the path of God," the core piece of literature or "manual" of the Tablighi Jamaat, namely the *Fazail-e-Amal* (*Virtues of Everyday Actions*) was included in

among children of these "core families." In short, the above-mentioned families formed the backbone to a number of important activities inside the madrasa, such as looking after everyday affairs and setting the curriculum.

Contents of learning

While the men in charge suggested that the curriculum was based on the standardized madrasa curriculum known as the *dars-e-nizami*,⁴ my observations suggested that substantial modifications had been made in line with a particular underlying ideal of Islamic womanhood. A close comparison of the two curricula indicated that a range of subjects was either not taught at all, or the contents were selectively shortened, allegedly so as to fit the shorter duration of the course in this girls' madrasa. What was taught in practice again deviated in many cases from the formal curriculum. For example, while only eight hours of *adab* or value oriented literature in Arabic,⁵ were scheduled on the timetable, which were not mentioned at all in the formal curriculum, value education took up significantly more time than that. Combining the daily readings from the *Fazail-e-Amal* and *adab*, value education—formally and informally taught—aimed at all spheres of life, which was facilitated by the given that the madrasa was a boarding institution. The limited space necessitated discipline, combined with the internalization of a particular modest dress code, as we saw above. Such processes are best subsumed under the madrasa's "civilizing mission,"⁶ because apart from training the often lower caste rural students in Islamic theology, the underlying educational aim of "improving the students' personal lives" hints at something larger. By adopting Arabic as the main language of instruction at an advanced stage of the five-year course, the importance given to lessons in *adab* and the emphasis on the virtues or *fazail* taught in the everyday readings from the Tablighi *Fazail-e-Amal*, the students were groomed into a particular worldview, lifestyle, and ideal of Islamic womanhood. Nevertheless, the seemingly all-pervading discipline also offered space for deviation as well as competition with regard to who was the most pious among the girls. Besides personal reform, the grooming and competition at the level of piety among the girls represented the strive for upward social mobility. While most of the students and their parents indicated that the main reason for the girls' studies in the madrasa was religious merit for them, their families, or the community at large, I often observed that the "civilizing mission" served as a preparation for marriage with young men from wealthy families, not rarely settled abroad in South Africa or in the Gulf States.



A glance through the staff-room window of the Madrasatul Niswan, Delhi, 2003

PHOTO BY MAREIKE JULE WINKELMANN, 2003

A Tablighi perspective on women's education

As the views of the men in charge suggested a link between their educational ideas and the particular worldview promoted by the Tablighi Jamaat, I tried to identify relevant literature in the nearby bookshops. Here the books studied in the madrasa were sold off the shelf and numerous treatises for women or addressing the topic of women in relation to a host of related issues were available as well. One such example authored by a Tablighi activist is a treatise called *Women in the Field of Education and Piety* wherein Islamic education for women is promoted, as "failing to do this women and their innocent offspring will be washed away in a flood of irreligiousness, and ruin their worldly and next lives."⁷ It is suggested that women are obliged to know *masail* (questions pertaining to Islamic law) and to seek knowledge about creation and law, so that they may become aware of evils that may harm their children, which include novels, television, cinema, theatre, and fashion. From a tablighi point of view, women are seen as equal to men with a view to acquiring *sawab* (merit) for the Hereafter and by a similar token *purdah*, in the reduced sense of modest behaviour, should be observed by men and women alike and should not form a hindrance in women's pursuit of knowledge. Characteristic of the Tablighi perspective on women's education are the idealization of past role models, such as the female companions of the Prophet, paired with apprehensions concerning new areas of studies, especially with regard to non-Islamic or *duniyavi* subjects. Owing to the above reservations, the suggested method of learning is that women should be taught by a knowledgeable man from behind a curtain at home, while the women in turn should teach others in their neighbourhood.

Weekly women's meetings

Apart from being taught at home, weekly *dini* (religious) programmes for women should facilitate the process of self-reformation. Such women's programmes should include the following elements: a reminder to perform the five ritual *salat* (prayers) regularly; a reminder with regard to punctuality in counting *tasbehat* (rosaries); encouragement to study books on *fazail* (virtues); and an encouragement to send out the men in the path of God. Such weekly meetings for women represent yet another parallel between the madrasa and the Tablighi Jamaat. While in the Tablighi centre these *bayans* (lectures) were held by a man, who spoke from behind a curtain every Thursday afternoon, in the Madrasatul Niswan the Programme was organized by the teachers and students themselves.

A group of teachers from the Madrasatul Niswan frequented the bayans in the Tablighi centre regularly, because apart from hoping to learn something new, the short trips to the nearby centre provided an opportunity for regular outings, which were rare otherwise. Prior to the bayans in the centre, the teachers and students in the Madrasatul Niswan held their so-called Thursday Programme around noon.

Here the gatherings generally consisted of the following elements: recitations from the Quran; *ahadith* (traditions of the Prophet); *namaz* (prayer); *tafsir* (exegesis); *fiqh* (Islamic law); *naath* (religious poetry in Urdu); *tarana* (Urdu or Arabic anthems in praise of the madrasa); and finally value oriented literature. Since the Programme was held in Urdu as well as Arabic, the latter was translated for those less familiar with the language. While for the young women belonging to the core families, knowledge of "true Islam" was closely associated with the mastery of Arabic, for the majority of lower caste rural students Arabic merely represented another tough subject they had to master. For the neighbourhood women who came to attend the Programme on a regular basis, the event provided an opportunity to learn something about Islam and to be reminded of one's moral obligations, which seemed to be the primary aim of the weekly meetings.

Although the Tablighi Jamaat is known to oppose formal associations with educational institutions, let alone with a girls' madarasa, the links and points of overlap mentioned above between the Madrasatul Niswan and the Tablighi Jamaat indicate that at the informal level the situation is far less clear-cut and the boundaries are blurred.

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Notes

1. The Kashful Uloom madrasa for boys was established by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, founder of the Tablighi Jamaat.
2. Although the name of the madrasa is fictitious, it is a name I encountered during fieldwork, be it in a different context.
3. I use "purdah" in a broader sense denoting female segregation, modest behaviour, as well as modest dress.
4. Regarding the history of the *dars-e-nizami* see Jamal Malik, *Islamische Gelehrtenkultur in Nordindien. Entwicklungsgeschichte und Tendenzen am Beispiel von Lucknow* (Leiden, Brill, 1997), 522-541.
5. While *adab* is often translated as social etiquette, in this context what was taught incorporated more than just etiquette and hence the use of the term "value education."
6. With regard to the "civilizing mission" of madrasas see Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffrey, "The First Madrasa. Learned Mawlawis and the Educated Mother," in *Islamic Education, Diversity and National Identity. Dini Madaris in India post 9/11*, ed., Jan-Peter Hartung and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005).
7. Mohammed Yunus, *Women in the Field of Education and Piety* (Dewsbury: Darul Kutub, 1994).