

Practising Islam: Claiming the Social

17th April 2010

The workshop Practising Islam: Claiming the Social was organized on 17th April 2010 with the objective of discussing the domains of action that Muslim women are seeking to inhabit, occupy and activate through their work. Rather than posing citizenship and religious community as opposing categories, the workshop sought to position Muslim women's activism as straddling and interrogating both these categories. It sought to take a close look at the initiatives of women practicing Islam – of setting up madrassas, jamaats, mosques, voluntary organizations and their presence in politico-religious spaces such as the All India Muslim Personal Law Board. And also raise the question – what do their presence and claims in these spaces signify to an understanding of Muslim woman's subjectivity contemporary India. The one day workshop had two sessions with two speakers each. Each of the speakers presented their work, either activist, research or a combination of both.

The first session was chaired by Susie Tharu who opened the panel with a few comments on the question that religion has posed to the women's movement in India. Uzma Naheed, the active woman member of All India Muslim Personal Law Board spoke at length about the kind of questions that a Muslim has to face in the Indian context where the majority belongs to the Hindu religion and the availability of creative practices within Islamic discourse on this question. Given this availability of creative practices, in her understanding, the tasks of Islamic education in India are multiple and nuanced, requiring careful thinking and discretion at every stage about the ways in which it would affect the community. Placed in this context, her work has involved preparing modern curricula for madrassas and working towards the formulation of a modern *nikhanaama*, among other things. Through a detailed narration of the process in which consolidation of the ulema opinion on the question of *nikhanaama* has been obtained, she sought to demonstrate her conception of the political. Given the reach and influence of the ulema on questions of marriage and family, she thinks that a careful negotiation and consensus building on the *nikhanaama* has been crucial. For her, the Board's acceptance of the *nikhanaama* in principle means much more than the friction caused by parting ways of the dissenting factions. While she did face a good deal of patriarchal opposition from some members of the Board, despite being the daughter of its General Secretary, her consistent work has won over ulema situated in remote corners of the country. She is now called upon by them to speak at these locations. The *nikhanaama* that she presented involves radical provisions about the property and meher that women would

get, once it is adopted. She concluded by proposing that this nikhanaama be made popular and adopted by the local women's groups.

In the discussion that followed her presentation, several speakers discussed their problems about the Board. Rehana Sultana questioned the Board's opposition to the radical provisions in the nikhanaama, its lack of effort to popularize the nikhanaama and its lackadaisical attitude towards the erring ulema who solemnize any and all kind of nikha. Safiya inquired why the Board seems reluctant to take up pro-women provisions through their activism.

V.Geetha, the next speaker, presented her work with STEPS, an organization in rural Tamilnadu, Pudukottai, which started women's jamaats in many parts of the state. Clarifying that her tone as an observer would be quite different from that of Sharifa who runs this organization, she presented the work of these jamaats that she has observed over many years. These were started during the process of the organization's work on resolving family disputes where they confronted the male jamaats' unsympathetic attitude. In contrast with the elitist ulema, the woman who inhabit these jamaats are illiterate and poor but have learnt to use the Quran in their daily negotiations with their marital families, men and local male jamaats. Geetha described in detail the gatherings and proceedings of the jamaats and the kind of questions that are raised by the women here. The contractual notion of nikha and the obligations enjoined upon the husband are invoked during many disputes. Though there was some opposition from the male jamaats there, a grudging acceptance followed, with 'unsolved cases' sent by them to the women's jamaats. The magazine that the organization runs has madrasa teachers writing on Quranic chapters while connecting it to a local event. Prayers and Quran readings precede the jamaat meetings. Interpreting their Quranic mandate, the women's jamaat has decided to build a mosque only for women. In this process an unlikely Islamic community of poor and illiterate women has emerged. However, the strides that they have made in their public lives have not been easy to translate into their familial decisions such as daughters' marriages.

Much discussion followed Geetha's paper. Lalita wondered whether poor women's struggles in their everyday lives did not have similar tones every where? Suneetha asked if Geetha could describe her journey as a secular feminist through this entire process. Vasudha asked why Geetha's narrative still remained in that of a secular feminism looking skeptically at what is happening in the community.

The afternoon session was chaired by Asma Rasheed. The first presentation was by A.Suneetha on Muslim women's activism in Hyderabad. Placing the Hyderabad activism in the current debate on Muslim women in India, she outlined the ways in which Islam entered the narratives of each activist that she interviewed. She then went on to discuss their work in family dispute resolution and the field of education. In domestic violence, the emphasis is often on resolution of the problem, while it is education which is understood as the basis for shaping one's perspective of the world and one's life therein. She concluded on a tentative note, wondering if this work fitted the description of either Islamic feminism or minority feminism.

The discussion of her paper was on the following lines. Susie wondered if a foregrounding of Islam was necessary in the analytical framework of her paper. And would it not be more useful to approach the Muslim women's question through a discussion of their work in domestic violence and education. Often, such as foregrounding reinforces the imagination of Muslims as a 'religious' community and thereby the secularist framework in which it has been framed. Fathima Ali Khan asked what methodological precautions she has taken to see that the sample was not biased towards women who claimed to be practicing Muslims and how would one be sure that it is their belief that is the root of their activism. Another person asked what kind of solutions these groups are offering to the women who approached them about their familial problems. Vasudha responded by drawing from the example of a case where the woman could not prove her justified case to the court and the helpless judge at the Lok Adalat, while pronouncing judgement said, 'you may have won the case, but the God will surely punish you'. She said that the presence of God's justice often was the solace for many women, where the court's justice failed or had no way of giving the woman any relief.

The last paper in the session was by Rafat Seema who presented the journey of Jamait-ul-Makharim, the unique women's madrassa that she started in Hyderabad in ... Its place needs to be understood in the context of the growth of women's madrassas in Hyderabad. The two major madrassas in India that came up in the 1970s were established by the Jamait-e-Islami-Hind, in Rampur and ... Later in the 1980s and much more in the 1990s, several madrassas for women began to be established in Hyderabad. After having completed her course in Jamait-ul-Saalehaat, the women's madrassa in Rampur, she was asked to head the women's madrassa, just being started by Jamait-e-Islami in Hyderabad, the Jamait-ul-Bannaat in 1988. She discussed the changes in curriculum that she introduced such as inclusion of English and discussions on news and her successful attempts at

making the madrassa students enroll into state education. It is during the course of her tenure at Bannat that several women sought her out to seek Islamic education. These were the women being confronted with different images of Islam in their daily life, women who were bothered by the state of their fellow Muslims who wanted to know what Islam actually 'is'. They could not afford to enroll in regular madrassa due to their work and familial responsibilities. Jamait-ul-Makharim, a Sunday madrassa was started to address this constituency in 1998 in which girls and women pursuing their education in the state institutions join for Islamic education.

In the discussion, participants wanted to know more about the students, their aspirations and their placements after they complete their course in madrassas. The workshop, attended by several Muslim women activists, students and teachers was characterized by a restrained and thoughtful discussion of the presentations.