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Islamic feminism and Muslim women's rights activism in India: from transnational discourse to local movement - or vice versa?

Nadja-Christina Schneider¹

Abstract

The very recent phenomenon called Islamic feminism receives quite a lot of attention from academia and media alike. Although it is basically a discourse whose strategy and praxis is primarily script related, there seems to be an overt tendency to equate Islamic feminism with an *ideology* for a transnational social or political movement. As a perceived *singular movement*, Islamic feminism is often distinguished from two other supposedly singular movements, namely "Muslim feminism" and "Islamist feminism". With regard to India, however, these ideal types don't seem to be very helpful as analytical categories, as the growing influence and reference to Islamic feminism there simply cannot be associated with one distinct group of proponents or one movement exclusively. Therefore, I will argue here that a clear distinction should rather be made between Islamic feminism as a *discursive* movement, and the distinct local, national or transnational social and political movements that are *all* increasingly referring to this discourse. In India, these movements in many cases precede the emergence of Islamic feminism in the 1990s. So by making this distinction, the focus of analysis can be shifted from the repeated finding of ideological divisions and frictions within a supposedly singular Islamic feminist movement to the focus on the enormous potential that this discourse obviously has for Muslim women's agency in general as well as for the emergence of new female subjectivities in India (and elsewhere) which in turn seem to challenge and change secular-national gender discourses.

Keywords: Muslim women's rights, Muslim Personal Law, India

Introduction: Indian Muslim citizens and the quest for modernity

For quite some time, the renewed orientation of many Muslims worldwide towards the normative sources of their religion has been equated with a perceived quest for the legitimacy of an "anti-Western," "dogmatic" or "rigid" Islam. That this is not necessarily the agenda behind it becomes very clear when one looks at recent developments in India. Faced with enormous political, social and economic challenges, more and more active "lay" Muslims in India are engaging in fresh interpretations of the Islamic tradition, which for them as *citizens* of a modern nation-state could help to build bridges towards the majority community or society in general and not detach them from it any further. This effort is not restricted to a tiny minority of Muslim intellectuals, as it is supported, for example, by sections of the newly emerging Muslim middle class in India and many grass-roots movements all over the country. One could even argue that the discussion of burning questions, such as education, reform, the political representation of Indian

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Muslims, and above all the legal and social status of Muslim women, has led to the emergence of a new public sphere in India in recent years which, in turn, is linked to many other transnational and/or local Muslim publics (see Eickelman and Anderson 1999 and Salvatore/Eickelman 2004). As Sikand points out, the language of this new Muslim public sphere is English, not Urdu, which may be one of the reasons why it has gone largely unnoticed by the academic community so far, since Urdu is still regarded by many as the preferred language of Indian Muslim discourse (Sikand 2006).²

These new Muslim actors in local, national, and transnational spaces argue that believing Muslims do not depend on religious authorities in order to understand the Koran, but that they can rather and should indeed read and interpret the Koran for themselves. Thus, like other contemporary reform movements *within* Islam, their efforts can be seen as an answer to the perceived crisis of religious authority as well as the crisis of (political) representation, on the local, national and global level (see for instance Göle 2002 and 2004, Sharify-Funk 2004, Mahmood 2005 and 2006, and Krämer/Schmidtke 2006).

Especially with regard to India, not much attention has been paid to this discursive movement so far. This holds true also with regard to the emerging Muslim women's rights movement in India that came to life in the aftermath of the heated controversy on the religion-based personal laws for Muslims in India in the 1980s (Muslim Personal Law). Much more than in its initial phase, this emancipatory movement seems to be informed by and draw a lot of inspiration from the global discourse of Islamic feminism, which gained momentum in the 1990s (see for instance Badran 2007, Barlas 2002, Wadud 2006 and Moghadam 2007). Hence their claim to reform gender unjust laws within Muslim Personal Law is not necessarily based on the Indian constitution³ or the universal principle of human rights, but first and foremost on the authority of the Koran. The central argument of Islamic feminism is that the Koran guarantees a number of rights to women, which are constantly denied to them as a consequence of prevailing patriarchal interpretations.

As a perceived *singular* movement, Islamic feminism is often distinguished from "Muslim feminism" and "Islamist feminism". With regard to India, however, I will argue in this article that these ideal types are not very helpful as analytical categories, since the growing influence and reference to Islamic feminism simply cannot be associated with one distinct group of proponents or one movement exclusively. Therefore, I will suggest that a distinction should rather be made between Islamic feminism as a *discursive* movement, and the distinct organizations or movements that are *all* increasingly referring to it, and hence to focus more on the enormous potential that Islamic feminism has for Muslim women's subjectivity and agency in India.

Islamic feminism: discourse or social movement?

² The media that seem to matter most for this new public sphere are print media and, maybe even more importantly, the Internet. There are, for instance, a number of very interesting weblogs, such as indianmuslims.in, anindianmuslim.com, and websites, such as twocircles.net. Even if they declaredly cater to the needs of Indian Muslims, they also form part of the transnational and translocal dynamics of current Muslim Internet activism and debate.

³ Article 44 (Directive Principles of State Policy) of the Indian constitution says, "(t)he State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India".

According to Moghadam, Islamic feminism is first and foremost a discourse whose strategy and praxis is primarily script related (Moghadam 2007). Nevertheless, there seems to be a clear tendency among observers to equate this discursive strategy or praxis with an *ideology* that generates or is expected to generate a transnational social or political movement, or - as the critics of Islamic feminism maintain - that is bound to fail in this respect. Accordingly, it is often stated that the Islamic feminist *movement* is confronted with “ideological divisions”, a “weak interconnectedness”, “internal conflicts” among Islamic feminists and “divisions weakening the movement as a whole” or with “frictions inside the movement” (Vatuk 2008)⁴. These observations are obviously based on the idea of a more or less coherent, singular movement grounded in Islamic feminism.

I will argue here, however, that in the specific Indian context, the very recent emergence of Islamic feminism can be best understood as a discursive praxis that is adapted by women’s rights activists who, in many cases, have already been associated with local/regional or national women’s movements *and* by actors within Islamic or “Islamist” movements and organizations alike, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind (JIH)⁵. As we can observe in India and elsewhere, the increased turning of certain groups within these distinct movements to the global discourse of Islamic feminism does not mean that they become sort of “natural allies”. Nor does it necessarily imply that these actors and different local movements feel the need to build networks or develop a common agenda, not to mention a singular movement.

Hence, rather than conceptualizing Islamic feminism as an ideology or category for a transnational social or political movement, it is considered here a *discursive movement* or *strategy* that is adapted by certain actors to specific and local contexts. This argument is corroborated by the fact that many Muslim women’s rights activists who draw upon this discourse would never accept the label “feminist” or “Islamic feminist” as it still has a negative or ambiguous connotation in non-Western contexts⁶ (see, for instance, Abou-Bakr 2001 and Barlas 2005).

Critical absence of Muslim women in the grand historical narratives

Until very recently, observers were not at all convinced that Islamic feminism would ever come to light in India. In the eyes of Asghar Ali Engineer (2008) and Zarina Bhatti (2003), for instance, two essential preconditions for the long overdue appearance of an Islamic gender critique in India were missing, firstly a qur’anic hermeneutics based

⁴ See also the explanatory notes to the International Workshop “Reconsidering ‘Islamic Feminism’: Deconstruction or the Quest of Authenticity?”, Berlin, 26-28 May & 2 May 2007, retrieved from http://eumeberlin.de/fileadmin/arbeitgespraech_werkshops/workshop_Reconsidering_islamic_feminism_april_may_2007.pdf

⁵ After Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami (founded in 1941) had migrated to Pakistan in 1947, the remaining parts of the movement in India united under the umbrella of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind. Today, it is one of the leading social and religious organisations (and movement) of Muslims in India, but unlike the Jamaat organisations in Pakistan or Bangladesh, the JIH is not a political party. However, in January 2009 the JIH announced that it would launch a political party of its own soon. See “Ammeer-e-Jamaat on Terrorism, SIMI & politics in India”. Retrieved from <http://www.jamaateislamihind.org/index.php?do=category&id=37&pageid=381> (undated).

⁶ Maulana Waris Mazhari’s reproach that many advocates of Islamic feminism “have no independent world-view of their own and that they simply follow the dominant Western feminist discourse, which they seek to propagate in an Islamic guise” is exemplary for this critique. Mazhari (2009). “Islam, Women and Islamic Feminism”, retrieved August 11, 2009, from <http://www.indianmuslimobserver.com/2009/08/-indian-muslim-news-women.html>. Translated from Urdu by Yoginder Sikand.

on gender equality and, secondly, the inclusion of Muslim women in women's and gender studies (Engineer 2006, Bhatta 2003). Regarding the latter deficit, Tahera Aftab (2008) argues in her groundbreaking bibliography "Inscribing South Asian Muslim women" that studies on the history and contemporary situation of Muslim women in South Asia are generally scarce. According to Aftab, South Asian Muslim women are generally represented as "oppressed", "backward" and "victims of the double tyranny" of their religion and the specifically South Asian form of patriarchy which is grounded in the traditional Hindu view of femininity (Aftab 2008). Historians like Gail Minault (1998), Barbara Metcalf (1990) and Azra Asghar Ali (2000) - to mention just a few - have shown that Muslim women and men alike have constantly strived for new or re-definitions of existing women's rights since the second half of the 19th century (see also Pernau 2008). Among them were and are until today many eminent writers and poetesses of the 20th and 21st century, such as Ismat Chughtai⁷, Qurratulain Hyder⁸, and Jilani Bano⁹, to mention just these few. At present, the poetic voices (and sociopolitical actions) of Tamil author and poet Salma¹⁰, Telugu poet Shahjahana¹¹ and Urdu poet and social activist Jamila Nishat¹², among others, are getting some attention, not only in India or South Asia, but also on an international level.¹³ But in spite of the manifold attempts to counter the essentialist construction of the Muslim woman as a "passive victim" by putting forward differentiated narratives and alternative images, the stereotypes seem to persist, especially in India.

As Nigar Ataulla, editor of India's largest-selling English-language Islamic magazine *Islamic Voice* (Bangalore), puts it, in the Indian context, whenever one talks of the status of Muslim women, the focus invariably falls on the notorious form of repudiation known as "triple talaq", the question of polygamy and the veil. She calls this essentialist perception of Muslim women a "dangerous triangle" (Ataulla 2006) and her observation is confirmed by a study on the perception of the Muslim minority in India. Especially when compared to women of other denominations, Muslim women are perceived as "submissive", "fragile" and "too weak to fight for their rights" (see Kidwai 2003, Schneider 2005).

⁷ See, for instance, Ismat Chughtai (2001). *Lifting the veil. Selected writings of Ismat Chughtai*. Selected and translated by Mohammed Asaduddin, New Delhi: Penguin, and idem (1990). *The guilt & other stories*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

⁸ See, for instance, Qurratulain Hyder (2004). *My temples, too. A novel*. New Delhi: Women unlimited, and idem (1999). *A Season of Betrayals. A Short Story and Two Novellas*, translated with an introduction by C.M. Naim. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

⁹ See, for instance, Jilani Bano (2004). *The alien home & other stories*. Translated by Zakhia Mashhadi. New Delhi: National Book Trust.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Salma (2009). *The Hours Past Midnight*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. New Delhi: Zubaan Books.

¹¹ See interview with Shahjahana in *Just Between Us - Women Speak About Their Writing*, ed. by Ammu Joseph, Vasanth Kannabiran and Ritu Menon (2004). New Delhi: Kali for Women/Women Unlimited.

¹² See Jamila Nishat (2008). *My life-giving Ganges, poems of Jamila Nishat*, translated by Hoshang Merchant. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

¹³ The inscription of Indian Muslim women writers and poetesses into the literary histories and canons (e.g. of Urdu or Tamil literature and poetry) is certainly another area where a lot of research needs to be done. See for instance, Christina Oesterheld (2004). *Urdu and Muslim women*. In Daniela Bredi (ed.). *Islam in South Asia* (monographic number of *Oriente Modern*, No.1, 2004): 217-243, and id. (1994). *Voices from the inner courtyard* (On early women poets of Urdu). In Dilip Chitre et al. (ed.) (1994). *Tender Ironies. A Tribute to Lothar Lutze*. New Delhi: Manohar.

“Inscribing” Muslim women into the grand narratives or making them more visible as social actors thus remains a very difficult undertaking. What makes it even more problematic is the fact that Muslims in India are still seen as an obvious community that draws its specificity from an inherent nature of its religion. On the one hand, it is overlooked in this perspective that, as members of Indian society, Indian Muslims are naturally involved in processes of economic change, nation-building and secularization just like any other section of the population. On the other hand, the role of the state is often neglected, especially with regard to the relationship between the state and patriarchal structures in society. The Indian state, however, has always been actively involved in the definition and construction of the family and private sphere. This can be best exemplified with regard to the history and post-colonial interventions of the Indian state in Muslim Personal Law (Chhachi 1999).

A watershed moment for the secular women’s movement in India: The controversy over Muslim Personal Law

The long controversy surrounding the question whether religious family laws form an obstacle to democracy, national unity and progress of Indian society or rather a warrant for legal pluralism as a basis for the plurality of Indian society, reached its climax in the course of the oft-cited Shah Bano case in the mid-1980s¹⁴. The fiercely disputed question of maintenance for repudiated or divorced Muslim wives was exploited, among others, by Hindu nationalist actors who called for the substitution of existing religion-based personal laws by a Uniform Civil Code as envisaged by the Indian constitution. In the course of the debate, it became clear that this “secular” civil code would in fact resemble more or less the already existing Hindu Code, since secularism for the representatives of Hindu nationalism in the context of this debate meant “secularism in a Hindu way” (see Schneider 2005:244ff.). Moreover, the avowed commitment to an overarching civil law code was increasingly equated with a “commitment to the nation”. Muslim groups and individuals who argued for the retention of Muslim Personal Law as an integral part of their cultural rights were subsequently not only branded as “backward” and “misogynist” but increasingly also as “anti-national” and “unwilling to integrate” into Indian society (Schneider 2005:216ff.).

Faced with the growing polarization about this question, the Congress government under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi somewhat hastily adopted the so-called Muslim Women (Rights of Protection on Divorce) Bill in 1986. The law gave Muslim personal law priority over criminal law in maintenance issues, and by doing so effectively excluded Muslim women from seeking criminal procedure. By adopting this law, the Indian state also put an end to the repeated attempt of Muslim women since the 1980s to obtain

¹⁴ The Shah Bano case originated in the late 1970s, when an Indian civil court sentenced the lawyer M.A. Khan to pay monthly maintenance to his divorced wife Shah Bano. Khan was unwilling to accept this judgment and appealed to the Supreme Court in Delhi. He argued that Muslim women only have a right to maintenance payments during a three-month period (*iddat*), under Islamic law. His appeal was finally rejected in 1985, prompting a fierce controversy between supporters of the decision and Muslim community leaders, who felt their cultural rights as a minority had been violated. Their outrage was fuelled by the clearly disparaging remarks on Islam in the presiding Supreme Court Judge Chandrachud's final comments. To assuage its Muslim voters, the Congress government under Rajiv Gandhi rushed through an act on the “protection of the rights of Muslim women” in 1986. The law gave Islamic personal law priority over criminal law in maintenance issues, effectively excluding Muslim women from seeking criminal procedure.

maintenance under secular jurisdiction (Chhachhi 1999). It was thus the Indian state itself that, which by its legislative power, sought to re-establish and re-confirm the patriarchal, religiously justified control over Muslim women, as Chhachhi argues. It seems important to me to highlight this aspect, especially with respect to the controversy on Islamic feminism and the oft-repeated critique that it represents a “compromise with patriarchy” (see Moghissi 1999, Mojab 2001).

Regarding the development in India, one could rather argue that it is above all due to this entanglement between state intervention and patriarchal claims to power on the part of Muslim organizations like the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, that Muslim women’s rights activists were forced to look for new ways to engage with religious and political discourse and to seek legitimacy *within* Islamic discourse. It is from this point of departure that recent feminist thinking in India stresses the necessity and possibility of reform *within* the framework of existing (religion-based) family laws as a viable way to achieve gender-just laws.

For the secular women’s movement, which had gained strength since the 1970s, the Muslim Women Bill marked a watershed-moment in its postcolonial history. For secular women’s rights activists, the whole agitation over Muslim women’s rights on maintenance contained a series of bitter lessons of experience (Kumar 1995). Starting with the seeming ease with which the Indian state had bowed to the communitarian agenda, to the disregard for a key principle of liberalism, namely that religiously defined rights and religious freedom must not supersede individual rights. For many decades, the diverse secular women’s movement in India had been united by the idea that the State should encourage the society’s cultural, social and political progress through legislation and thereby strengthen “national integration”. This is also the reason for the movement’s long-standing support for the claim for an overarching Civil Law code in India. And this, on the other hand, explains the appearance of a very peculiar argumentative alliance with regard to Muslim personal law in the 1980s, which was, among others, supported by extremist Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and parts of the Indian women’s movement (Schneider 2005:188 and 289).

Initial doubts with respect to the secular nation-state came up only in the context of the general critique of secularism from the mid-1980s onwards. Following this critique, the elitist assumption that social change and progress were inherent to the process of nation-building, was now more and more challenged. Faced with the appropriation of their claim for an overarching Civil Law Code by Hindu nationalist actors, these doubts grew stronger in the aftermath of the Shah Bano case. Especially the critique of well-known women’s rights activists such as Madhu Kishwar¹⁵ and Flavia Agnes¹⁶ were very important in this context. The disillusionment with the state and the realization that Hindu

¹⁵ Madhu Purnima Kishwar is the founder editor of “Manushi”, a Journal about Women and Society published since 1979. She has authored and edited several books, among others, Madhu P. Kishwar (2008). *Deepening Democracy. Challenges of Governance and Globalization in India*. Oxford University Press India, and idem (1999). *Off the Beaten Track. Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women*. Oxford University Press India.

¹⁶ Flavia Agnes is a women’s rights lawyer and social activist. She has written extensively on issues of domestic violence, feminist jurisprudence and minority rights. See, for instance, Flavia Agnes (1999). *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women’s Rights in India*. Oxford University Press India. She is also the founder of „Majlis“, a legal advocacy programme for women based in Mumbai.

nationalist actors had more or less seized a genuine feminist demand led to a growing dissociation of feminist actors from this agenda. As a result of this, the claim for a Uniform Civil Code seems to be no longer supported by major women's organizations in India at present (Hasan 1999:138). It remains a debated issue, however, which strategies should be best followed in order to achieve greater gender equality under the existing religion-based laws, i.e. Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Parsi Laws.

Increasing visibility of Muslim women in public spheres

Contrary to the experience of the secular women's movement in India, the Shah Bano case and the adoption of the Muslim Women Bill represent a point of departure for the emerging Muslim women's rights movement in postcolonial India and a very recent phenomenon that is labeled as Islamic feminism. Many local Muslim women's rights groups and initiatives were founded in the late 1980s, such as the Goa Muslim Women's Association or Awaaz-e-Niswan in Mumbai. Although many of these organizations have been active for more than 20 years, the English-language press in India, for instance, has only started to cover their activities and agenda to a significant extent from the late 1990s onwards (Schneider 2008). Especially during the last three years, quite a number of reports and interviews with Muslim women's rights activists have been published. Many of these articles put a focus on Muslim women's organizations and activists who question religious authorities, especially the Ulama,

- 1) strive for reforms of existing laws within the framework of Muslim Personal Law in order to strengthen the rights of Muslim women,
- 2) are planning to found a mosque for women,
- 3) point out that Islam as a religion does not discriminate or oppress women but rather the patriarchal system that has been established on the basis of a highly selective interpretation of the normative sources, especially the Koran.

Against the background of the absence of Muslim women from media discourse and their clichéd representation as "passive victims" of violence and discrimination within their religious community, the increasing visibility of self-conscious Muslim women's rights activists in Indian public spheres may indeed be seen as a surprise. More correctly, one could perhaps speak of a *media-specific surprise* in the sense of Niklas Luhmann (1996). Luhmann argues that one of the basic principles of modern mass media is that they always rely on what has been publicized before and thus concentrate on specific variations of what is already known (in German: "das Bekanntsein des Bekanntseins", Luhmann 1996). In that sense, the sudden representation of Muslim women's rights activists in the Indian English-language media may well be regarded as a media-specific surprise since they are depicted as an "unexpected and new variation" in the all too well known narrative on Muslim women in India that has persisted for decades.

Having said that, it is important to note that these new actors are not simply "discovered" by journalists who are looking for new stories, but that Muslim women's rights groups have also actively developed new public relations strategies for themselves and established good relations with the media in order to attain more attention for their agenda. And this increased media activism on their part could also help to explain why representations of Muslim feminist thinking and activism in the Indian media have become more frequent only very recently. Nonetheless, it remains a highly ambiguous relationship for many Muslim women's rights activists in India, as the predominantly negative

and biased representation of the Muslim minority in Indian mass media has been and until the day continues to be a very central issue of concern and debate among Indian Muslims (Attaulla 2007).¹⁷

From local grass-roots activism to nationwide agenda setting: Muslim women's rights activism and the struggle for legal reform

It becomes quite clear from Vatuk's (2008) pioneering ethnographic study of Muslim women's organizations in India that very few, if any, of them were initially founded in order to pursue the goal of legal reforms, nor to create more publicity for the Islamic feminist agenda. Most of them rather seem to have emerged from local grass-roots initiatives, which are so typical for the vital civil society in India. Vatuk (2008), for example, describes that the main activities of the largest and best-known organization led by Muslim women, Awaaz-e-Niswan (AeN), concentrate around the professional education of poor women with the goal of enabling them to make a living for themselves and their children. In addition to that, AeN offers marriage counseling on a weekly basis. These services are not only available to Muslim women exclusively. Nor does the way in which this counseling is carried out refer to a specific Muslim tradition, but rather follows a pattern which according to Vatuk is very typical for the world of feminist or women's NGOs in India (Vatuk 2008).

For these grass-roots initiatives, the increasing cooperation and networking of Muslim women's organizations on a national and even on an international level seems to be a more recent phenomenon. In these new contexts, the focus is not so much laid on help for individual women, but rather on a dialogue within the Muslim community, especially with the Ulama. As mentioned before, media campaigns and public relations strategies play a significant role on this level of activism: for example, when resolutions are passed on big conferences, they are immediately forwarded to the press and interview partners are made available. These organizations and networks often coordinate demonstrations in cooperation with secular women's organizations, and they organize so-called legal awareness camps for poor women in rural areas or urban slums as well as protest actions against so-called "anti-women fatwas" which mostly receive a lot of publicity (Engineer 2005).

The All-India Muslim Women's Rights Network (MWRN), which was founded in 1999 by activists from AeN and from the Mumbai-based Women's Research and Action Group (WRAG), is the most successful network with a nationwide radius. Every one or two years, they hold conferences, which at the same time serve as a meeting point for all the organizations which are active in this network. For instance, in 2005, about 300 delegates met in Lucknow and discussed questions such as the role of the State with respect to women's rights, the effects of communal violence on Muslim women and the challenges that Muslim women's rights activists are facing in India right now.

Between 1994-98, WRAG conducted an extensive study titled "Women & Law in the Muslim Community", with the declared aim of collecting, documenting and analyzing the diverse civil or family laws that are applied to Muslims in India. It is often overlooked that the term Muslim Personal Law does not refer to a codified or unified family law code and that laws may differ more or less significantly from region to region (see

¹⁷ See also: "Muslims and the Indian Media". Book review by Yoginder Sikand, retrieved April 24, 2009 from <http://www.countercurrents.org/sikand240409.htm>.

Mahmood 1986, 1993). One of the findings of this research project was that Muslim women in India clearly support the demand for reform of Muslim Personal Law in India (Nainar 2000). As WRAG describes on its homepage, it was this claim, which among other things, led to an increase in awareness-rising campaigns, which shall help to inform Muslim women about the rights that are guaranteed to them in the Koran and thereby encourage new impulses for debate on reform of MPL.¹⁸ In 2006, a new organization by the name of Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) was founded for this specific goal. BMMA claims to be the first pan-Indian movement uniting Muslim women across the various existing castes and classes in Muslim Indian society. It is this organization that most explicitly states its reference to the global discourse of Islamic feminism in the formulation of goals by declaring that BMMA strives “to explore possibilities of reforming personal laws based on male dominance”.¹⁹

From the self-description and development of Muslim women’s organizations in Mumbai, it becomes very clear that they are increasingly influenced by the discourse of Islamic feminism. At the same time, many of them remain firmly rooted in local grassroots initiatives and they also regard themselves as an integral part of the national women’s movement in India.

A very similar development can be observed with regard to the well-known South Indian women’s organization STEPS which was founded by Daud Sharifa Khanam in Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu in 1987. Like the Mumbai-based organization Awaaz-e-Niswan, STEPS was not founded for Muslim women exclusively. Interestingly, STEPS dedicates a lot of space on its website to the self-description of the organization, its origins, motives and goals. According to this account, STEPS was originally founded to fight against the discrimination of and violence against young girls and women. In 2003, the organization announced its intention to establish a monthly *jamaat* assembly for Muslim women in order to provide them with a public space for articulation *and* information about the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic principles by male religious authorities. This idea of a *jamaat* for women also seems to be a reaction to the growing frustration among Muslim women in Pudukottai about the decisions that are made by the (exclusively male) *Jamaat* members regarding questions of dowry, divorce, domestic violence, custody or child abuse. Provided that Muslim women even go to the local police station and seek help there, most of their complaints are transferred by police officers to the local *Jamaat* to which women have no access. Which means that the *Jamaats* make their opinion without even listening to the women and as a result of this, the judgments passed by them are often biased and one-sided (Bhatty 2008, Subramanian 2008).

In other words, by declaring their intention to found their own *jamaat* for Muslim women, STEPS activists fundamentally question the authority of the traditional *Jamaat* system as well as the legitimacy of its claim to exert control on the Muslim community. What attracted a remarkable amount of media attention in this context, was the plan of these *jamaat* members to build a mosque exclusively for women. The mosque is to be erected on a site that had been donated to them especially for this purpose. Besides the

¹⁸ See “Reform of Muslim Family Law”, retrieved from http://www.wragindia.org/campa_reform.html.

¹⁹ See “Objective” retrieved from <http://www.bmmaonline.org/page/?pid=33>, and also the interview with Zakia Nizami Soman, one of the founder members of the BMMA: Yoginder Sikand (2009). “Why can’t Muslim women also lead the whole community: BMMA”, retrieved from http://www.twocircles.net/2009nov02/why_can_t_muslim_women_also_lead_whole_community_bmma.html.

prayer room and a coordination office for questions related to education or job vacancies for women, the *jamaat* activists are also planning to set up a center for education and research on Islamic law and jurisprudence. While Khanam and her fellow-activists have experienced a lot of support and media attention during the last two years, they are at the same time faced with massive resistance on the part of conservative Ulama all over India and have received several death threats.²⁰

Access to mosques for women, not only in the sense of a place for prayer but as a *public space* where women are allowed to actively engage in, remains a very controversial issue among Indian Muslims. Following role models such as Sharifa Khanam and others, similar plans to erect mosques for women can be observed in different regions of the country.²¹

Despite the fact that they are faced with severe opposition and financial problems, the women activists in Pudukottai stick to their plan to build a mosque and Sharifa Khanam herself coordinates a big network of Muslim women in Tamil Nadu today.²² So in her case, again, the formulation “from transnational discourse to local movement” only serves to highlight certain aspects of the development whereas the opposite “from local movement to transnational discourse” seems to be equally correct. Various local Muslim women’s rights movements are clearly moving towards the global discourse of Islamic feminism, but this does not mean that they do not consider themselves as an integral part of a national women’s movement any longer, nor does it mean that they don’t function as grass-roots organizations on the local or regional level any more. **Thus, even if the same actors are involved, the concept of a *movement* may refer to very different settings, frameworks, forms of organization and communication. The discursive strategy or praxis of Islamic feminism indeed seems to be only one, albeit increasingly important, among other discursive strategies that are involved by Muslim women’s rights activists in India in their pursuit of gender-justice.**²³

Seen in this perspective, recent developments in India clearly seem to underline Ahmed-Ghosh’s argument that feminism in Muslim contexts cannot and should not be conceptualized in terms of mutually exclusive analytical categories such as “secular” or

²⁰ By increasingly going public and questioning established religious authorities and their knowledge production, these new Muslim actors are generally facing a lot of opposition and hostility, not only in India or South Asia, but also on a global level (see Zaman 2002). Especially in India and due to the highly problematic situation of Indian Muslims as a minority, they are also accused of being “disloyal” to their “community” (see Ataulla 2006).

²¹ For example, a new mosque for women was opened in August 2008 in Shillong in the Northeast. According to press reports, 150 women took part in prayer on the opening day. See, for instance, Anju Azad. “A masjid for women in Shillong”, retrieved Nov 17, 2008, from http://www.twocircles.net/2008nov17/masjid_women_shillong.html.

²² A short documentary titled “A Progressive Jihad: The Struggle to build a Women’s Mosque” by Dr. Zafar and Asra Q. Nomani is available on the internet. Retrieved from <http://video.aol.com/video-detail/india-steps-ngo-for-muslim-womens-development-avi-file/3526873420>.

²³ It is very interesting to note, for example, that, contrary to earlier perceptions of Muslim women’s rights activism based on the discourse of Islamic feminism, the increasing “politicization of Muslim women”, even in less urbanized regions of Tamil Nadu, is now regarded by secular feminists as one of the “most exciting” developments in contemporary Tamil society. See Sumi Krishna (2007). *Feminist Perspectives and the Struggle to Transform the Disciplines: Report of the IAWS Southern Regional Workshop*. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 14:3, 499-515, p. 510.

“Islamic” feminism but should rather be seen as a hybrid construction - in theory and practice (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008).

The question is, however, if this can be applied to the emergence of Islamic feminist thinking and activism within Islamic revivalist groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind as well? Or should we rather assume that the oft-cited assertion that Islamic feminism is an unwanted, albeit legitimate, child of political Islam simply does not hold true for India?

Islamic feminism within ‘Islamist’ groups: A different phenomenon altogether?

Islamic or “Islamist” organizations like the JIH were among the strongest proponents of a return to the normative sources of Islam and have thereby unknowingly created the precondition for Islamic feminism. The discourse of Islamic feminism is also based on the interpretation of the scriptural sources, although obviously not from a patriarchal or neo-patriarchal perspective, but from the perspective of gender justice. And this is exactly the reason why Islamic feminism has been called the “unwanted child of political Islam” by Ziba Mir-Hosseini²⁴. So if Islamic feminism is one of the unintended aftereffects of political Islam, as theoreticians of this discourse like Mir-Hosseini argue, a feminist Qur’anic hermeneutics could surely be expected to emerge from within Islamic or “Islamist” groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JIH) Hind, too. And indeed, there seems to be some evidence that such a development is actually also taking place inside the JIH. For example, when approximately 30.000 followers of the women’s wing of the JIH gathered in Hyderabad in February 2006, Nasira Khanum, the president of this sub-organization was quoted saying: “Islam advocates protection of women rights but men-dominated society hides the facts. Women themselves should know about their rights and learn to snatch them if denied”.²⁵ On the same occasion, it was announced by Abdul Basith Anwaar, state Jamaat chief, that the organization would enroll women members in a big way to take up various issues confronting the woman today.²⁶

Interestingly, Vatuk states that by using this markedly feminist rhetoric, “the leader of a religiously orthodox Islamist mass organization (...) essentially echoes what the leaders of so many much smaller organizations with longstanding and serious commitments to the pursuit of feminist goals, have been striving for two decades to communicate to the Muslim clerical establishment and the Muslim community at large” (Vatuk 2008:518). So is it merely a “derivative discourse”, to quote the famous phrase coined by Partha Chatterjee (1993), or does it represent a distinct development that has taken place within the JIH?

Contrary to Vatuk’s (2008) assessment, Ahmad (2008) offers a very different perspective on this question. He uses the concept of Islamic feminism as an analytical category for what he calls a “transformative movement within Islamist groups in India”. In his view, this current grew stronger especially in the years following Maududi’s death in 1979, and it was reinforced by the emergence of critical voices and a new generation that began questioning Maududi’s “neo-patriarchal and misogynist ideology” (Ahmad

²⁴ For an elaboration of this argument, see Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2006). Muslim Women’s Quest for Equality: Between Law and Feminism. *Critical Inquiry* 32, Summer 2006, 629-645.

²⁵ “Fight injustice, Jamaat tells Muslim women”. *Times of India*, February 13, 2006.

²⁶ Ibid.

2008). In the 1990s, these voices had finally become so strong that they had coined a new critical language that could be labeled as Islamic feminism.

Thus, it becomes clear that the local dynamics of the transnational discourse of Islamic feminism in India display some unexpected features that have not been taken into consideration so far and certainly need to be analyzed in greater detail. I would argue, however, that further research on Islamic feminism in India should not be conceptualized on a “national” level exclusively. Especially with respect to the two South Asian sister organisations of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind in Pakistan and Bangladesh, i.e. Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, there seem to be some interesting parallels, but also some significant differences that need to be discussed more systematically in a comparative study of the dynamics of Islamic feminism in South Asia.²⁷

Conclusion

From the literature that has been published on Islamic feminism in India so far, it seems that a twofold dilemma manifests itself on a theoretical-conceptual level. Firstly, it has to be taken into account that many social actors who are subsumed under the category “Islamic feminist”, would not necessarily accept this label for themselves, and this holds true not only with respect to India but also to Muslim women’s rights activists in other countries. And secondly, I would argue that a clear distinction should be made between Islamic feminism as a *discursive* movement whose strategy and praxis is first and foremost based on texts, and the local, national or transnational movements that are now making use of this discursive praxis, but in many cases actually precede the emergence of Islamic feminism in the 1990s. By making this distinction, the focus of analysis can be shifted from the repeated finding of “ideological divisions and frictions” within an assumed, singular Islamic feminist movement to the focus on the “unifying potential” that this discourse may or may not possess for the different actors in women’s movements and Islamic groups and perhaps even more importantly, to the question of their agency vis-à-vis established religious authorities.

Notwithstanding this important differentiation, it is an indisputable fact that Islamic feminism as a discourse and strategy has become a very important point of reference for different groups and contexts in India. For the time being, the achievement of gender equality within the framework of Muslim Personal Law in India is certainly not in reach yet, and especially the tedious attempt to convince Ulama that gender-just rights are an imperative is exhausting for many Muslim women’s rights activists. Ever since the

²⁷ Focusing on the question of agency and the emergence of new subjectivities of Muslim women within organizations such as the Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, Jamal argues (similarly to Ahmad (2008) that Islamic feminism exemplifies the potential that political Islam has for modernization and therefore, Islamic or “Islamist” movements themselves could be said to contribute (willingly or unwillingly) to processes of reform and “modernization” (Jamal 2009, see also Marsden 2008). Contrary to India, however, secular feminists in Pakistan are afraid that Islamic feminism rather than contributing to the debate on gender discourses in a productive way is now likely to replace secular feminism completely. They argue that Islamic feminism as the dominant discourse in Pakistan today tends to put gender relations and the question of women’s rights into an increasingly exclusive Islamic framework (see Zia 2009, and with regard to the general debate on feminism in Pakistan, also Dedebant 2003). Significant changes with regard to the initial position on gender relations and women’s rights also seem to have taken place within the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami also, albeit in a very different political context. According to Shehabuddin, the party has only very recently begun to stress the “individuality” of women in Islam and to support the claim for Muslim women’s rights (Shehabuddin 2008).

foundation of the All-India Muslim Women's Personal Law Board (AIMWPLB) in February 2005, however, which attracted a lot of media attention in India and beyond, it can hardly be ignored any longer that Muslim women in India have an increasingly audible voice in the newly emerging Muslim public sphere. Like many of their male counterparts, they encourage believing Muslims to read and to interpret the Koran for themselves and to find new ways to bring their religious belief in accordance with the prerequisites of today's life. And perhaps even more pronounced, Muslim women argue that the "modernization" and future of the Muslim minority heavily depends on the achievement of gender equality within the community *and* on the recognition of Muslim women as active Indian citizens by the majority community.

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