

**Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood** by Hem Broker,  
New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018

Modernization of madrasas in India has for long time been a vehemently debating issue between Indian state and madrasas officials. The Indian state provide a logic that madrasas are delineated as static and homogenous traditional institution which need to be modernized. Earlier in the 2014 general election Narendra Modi criticized that the madrasa was not enough to provide competitive education. He identified lack of education skills as constraints to Muslim youth's success. Therefore BJP government at the centre in 2015 allocated hundred crore for the madrasas modernization. It consider madrasa modernization as a major tool for the development of communities, a means to strengthen the 'weak organ of the body without which the body cannot be healthy (p. 258). But the overall logic of the Indian state provides- madrasa education is outdated and ill-conceived and not relevant to modern society, therefore need to be reformed. These binaries between traditional and modern has been challenged by Borker in her recent book, *Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood* which shows that the ill-conceived binaries of traditional versus modern and religious versus secular that underscore policy perspectives on madrasa reform (p, 254).

Borker's *Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood* is a rich detailed ethnographic study of Madrasa Jamiatul Mominat, affiliated to Deoband School, analyzed the role of madrasa education and translation in the imagination of an ideal woman into practice. The author meticulously observed recent changes within the Muslim community and highlighted role of madrasa education, opened ample opportunities for marginalized women, who were previously absent in the discourse of madrasa education. Based on deep ethnographic immersion in East Delhi for 12 months, Borker provides a more nuanced understanding in the changing negotiation of aspirations of young girls' ambivalence in pious practices in everyday lives (p, 278). She outlines her monograph within the broad field of anthropology of religion, scrutinizes the relationship between madrasa education, Islamic piety and aspirations of young Muslim girls in everyday lives. The book illustrates how madrasa education makes the lower middle-class Muslim girls more pious, submissive and within Islamic womanhood' and their safe zones, and to provide to them how to redefine social expectations around marriage, education, and employment. The author illuminates that madrasa education not only provides the ample opportunities to lower-middle-class girls

belonging to the minority community, but it also enhances their ‘capacity to aspire’ in the field of higher education and employment opportunities. For instance, it provides them ready access to alumni networks comprising of girls who have availed higher education and employment opportunities (p, 8).

The book comprises nine chapters with more than three hundred pages. The author identifies and meticulously analyses three key turning points to everyday lives of Muslim girls in madrasa. In the first half of the book, she dealt the educational journey of the girls home to Jamiatul Mominat. She successfully traces the trend of rise of girls’ madrasa in post-independent India. Broker convincingly relates the rise of girls’ madrasa to the rise of Hindutva politics, communalization of social space and various Islamic reform movements that stress on specific safety measures and control of women’s mobility, influence everyday educational choices(p, 112). The question must arise: why do parents prefer to send their children to madrasa, despite having a the mainstream school in their locality? On the other hand, Sachar Committee report (2005) highlighted the girls’ education dropout rate high. Because, the author cogently demonstrated that, along with moral and cultural concerns around modern school education that separates children from Muslim culture, creates morally prevalent corrupt atmosphere, co-education, and improper uniforms, make madrasa a popular choice to the lower middle class of Muslim parents (pp, 80-81). For parents, sending their children to madrasa Jamiat Mominat, it is meant to fulfill both kinds of knowledge-religious and secular education (*Dini and Duniyavi Talim*).

The second part of the book is concerned with anthropology of education, Islam and gender and everyday lives of girls’ students inside madrasa and new public space such as University. The author succinctly analyzed the role of madrasa education that translates the imaginary ideal of Islamic womanhood into practice. She unravels that the role of madrasa not only provides a space for active involvement in the production of an imaginative community but also provides a space to determine the community formation. In the journey of girls from Madrasa to University and their changing aspirations, the author has highlighted the flexibility of the pious ideals (*Kamil-momina*) and the role of the aspirations in the girls’ self-fashioning. However, at the same time, her research shows that the ambiguity between the madrasa rules and regulations and the actual practice of the pious gendered self in a relatively secluded and fenced setting such a girls’ madrasa takes on a whole new meaning in more public spaces such as Jamia Millia Islamia (p, 211). But more important here is, does

the madrasa education transform into the livelihood of these girls? Is the madrasa education able to provide quality education equal to the market value or just for marriage purpose parents send their children from madrasa to university? These madrasa students are competent to compete with other mainstream students. How parents negotiate with the *khula mahaul* to *mahfuz mahaul* (open atmosphere to safe atmosphere)? Earlier, the parents did not like *khula mahaul*, but now ready to send to their children to the university. These questions are missing in her analysis.

The book breaks popular stereotypes about dominant media's representation of madrasa as outdated, unbending, and unvarying religious institutions. She successfully shunned these stereotypes and writes that, there is a clear impulse towards change and gender, religion and madrasa are constantly changing and adapting to new values and norms (p, 269). There is widespread belief that most Muslims prefer to send their children to religious education or *dini madrasa*, but the data show that there are substantial numbers who attend government and primary schools.

The Conclusion, however, is clear, persuasive and well expressed. Borker cogently demonstrated that parents are not against the modern education. What they wanted was the ideal combinations of religious and secular education and once state provides ideal combination with modern education, but with strong tones of Islamic education and appropriate *mahaul*, they go for that. Borker's book provides a valuable contribution in the field of anthropology of Islam in general and gender and education in particular. While her research definitely benefits Indian society and policymakers, it equally benefits the neighbouring countries especially Pakistan and Bangladesh, because we live in the same a context today.

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