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Religious Practices: Preaching and Women Preachers: South Asia

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“Family, Body, Sexuality and Health”

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Much of the scholarship on women's lives and roles in South Asian cultures has been devoted to how women perform a variety of sociopolitical activities despite their religious contexts. Only lately have scholars begun to pay serious attention to women's religious lives, narratives, and motivations, and their diverse efforts to inhabit, in pious and sociopolitically meaningful ways, authoritative spaces in public religious spheres.

SHĪ'Ī WOMEN

Shī'ī women participate in majālis , rituals that commemorate the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn (the son of 'Alī and grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad), his family, and followers at the Battle of Karbala in the Muslim lunar month of Muḥarram 61 H./680 C.E. Majālis are especially widespread and conducted with particular intensity during this month that many Shī'īs devote to mourning Ḥusayn's martyrdom. Majālis for women are hosted, organized, conducted, and attended entirely by women. They occur in familial shrine rooms and courtyards or in public halls built exclusively for women. On these occasions, women often sing marṣiyya (devotional or commemorative verses) and deliver sermons and rawzas (recitations about Ḥusayn and his family). Small teams of young women vie to lead nawḥa (mourning chants), during which they beat their chests in rhythm or, in some cases, practice self-flagellation (Hegland 1998). Tabarruk (blessed offering, usually food) is distributed by the host (Howarth 2005).

Like their Sunnī counterparts, Shī'ī women were not until recently given formal religious training and could not become credentialed scholars. Today, some build up regional reputations as preachers, hosts, hymn singers, or chanters. Especially in communities where purdah (the practice of female modesty and seclusion) is strict, majālis enable women to travel, consolidate extrafamilial friendships, and pursue status, competence, and recognition through pious means (Hegland 1998, Howarth 2005).

In Pakistan, majālis – and with them the demand for women preachers and other performers – have increased significantly since the early 1990s, in tandem with Shī'ī ethnic unification around the transnational Shī'ī awareness catalyzed by the Iranian revolution and grievances against Sunnī governments. Wealthy women host lavish majālis in private structures built for such occasions, but women of any class can and do attend (Hegland 1998).

The state of women's religious education is also changing in Pakistan (Abou Zahab 2005). Women's madrasas are proliferating and since the mid 1980s increasing numbers of women have traveled to Iran to study in the Shī'ī madrasas of Qom. These train women muballighas (missionaries) and zākiras (ritual and majālis experts) who learn to preach partly from videocassettes of famous preachers. A generation of women scholar-preachers is thus being crafted that differs from traditional lay preachers, who often learnt their trade from their mothers (Howarth 2005). These “modern” preachers are taught to base their sermons on research and to denounce “deviant ideas” propagated by traditional women preachers.

Shī'ī women in South India practice 'amal , a ritual that calls upon certain members of the Prophet Muḥammad's family to bring the supplicant's troubles before God (D'Souza 2004). 'Amal is traditionally conducted at homes and private shrines by knowledgeable older women, but today is often held at public shrines under the supervision of female religious professionals. These experts often have some education but limited economic means, and 'amal is a religiously and morally rewarding way for them to earn small amounts of money (D'Souza 2004).

SUNNĪ WOMEN

Not only have South Asian Sunnī women traditionally had little access to public religious knowledge or space, but until recent decades they have rarely hosted private religious gatherings. Key to recent transformation have been growing Islamic revivalist movements such as Tablighi Jamaat (a transnational movement of spiritual renewal originating in the 1920s in North India; "Tabligh" for short) and the political party Jamaat-i Islami ("Jamaat" for short), founded by Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903–79) in the late 1930s in colonial India. There is also a growing number of independent women preachers, some of whom grew up with older family members, neighbors, and family friends as religious role models. Others, especially elite women, meet Muslim missionaries, often the wives of Muslim diplomats, and take up missionary work in turn.

Most Sunnī women preachers are lay preachers, but this will probably change as women's madrasas increase. In Bangladesh alone, roughly 70,000 girls and women were enrolled in madrasas in 2000 (Hannan 2005). Some of these madrasa graduates go on to teach at women's madrasas, thus expanding women's conventional roles as religious educators in their own homes as mothers and in the homes of others as long-term female tutor retainees or ustadhis, as Gail Minault (1998) has shown for colonial India. Unlike male madrasa graduates, however, current female graduates cannot be prayer leaders at mosques or conduct public rituals such as prayers, funeral and marital rites, or the like. Yet some preach among women in their families and neighborhoods, and Tabligh activists even travel to do so, though they must be accompanied by near male relatives. In this way, some women with little money or education can become religious leaders, partly usurping a role traditionally occupied by men. In addition to furthering aspirations to piety, which is the primary objective of many women preachers both within and outside Tabligh, it has been noted for Tabligh preachers that activism provides relief from housework and enables traveling and socializing (Metcalf 1998, Sikand 2001). This may be transposed to the world of Jamaat-i Islami women.

JAMAAT-I ISLAMI

Activist women affiliated with the Islamist party Jamaat-i Islami also spend time outside the home, forge extrafamilial relationships, and acquire intellectual religious skills. Moreover, they can travel together (locally) without male company and undergo more rigorous training in organizational conduct and leadership than do Tabligh women. Jamaat women and affiliated students oppose what they perceive as Indian and Western cultural-political hegemony and secularist Bengali nationalism in the name of an ideal Islamized polity. Female student affiliates of Jamaat recruit fellow students and train them in self-discipline, moral values, and religious knowledge through a variety of text-centered knowledge practices that are construed as "scientific." Each member records her daily activities in a "report book" that is evaluated by a supervisor monthly and must attend regular meetings. These are structured around scripture, lectures on religious principles, and Islamist-authored texts. Jamaat members and affiliates largely hail from the middle and lower middle classes (Huq 2006).

Adult Jamaat women, as opposed to student members, preach among urban women as well as rural women who are either unschooled or have finished with school. Jamaat activists, often based in urban areas, increasingly travel to rural areas to disseminate Islamist teachings among the rural poor (Shehabuddin 1999). Islamist students preach largely among urban student women. Further, while Jamaat women participate in electoral activities, most student affiliates do not.

WITNESS

In Bangladesh, the nascent women's Islamic organization Witness, oriented around educational activities, exemplifies emergent gender-conscious liberal Islamism. Witness cultivates an upper middle-class image, both to include and attract women with certain skills, connections, and liberal cultural sensibilities as well as to create a sense of empowerment in members, a sense of being privileged and of being more competent than both conservative Islamists lacking sophistication in Islamic approach and Westernized women lacking Islamic knowledge. Witness activists disseminate Islamic knowledge through contributions to local newspapers and international magazines, organization of and participation in panels, symposiums, and conferences, and increasingly via the Internet.

AL-HUDA

In Pakistan, the group led by female religious leader Dr. Farhat Hashmi, Al-Huda, boasts a far larger following than Witness. Al-Huda's structure is more formalized and its outreach projects are astutely tuned to contemporary marketplaces and media. Preachers such as Dr. Hashmi are very methodical, like Jamaat, but, like loosely organized Witness, are not explicitly partisan. Like Witness activists and the female student wing of Jamaat, preachers such as Hashmi primarily target educated urban women.

Hashmi urges women to study the Qur'ān for themselves (in translation); Tabligh differs on this point, maintaining that the Qur'ān can be studied and understood only by religious experts. Tabligh therefore focuses on individual reform and on study of a few texts by traditional religious scholars (Ahmad 1991, Metcalf 1993). Hashmi, in contrast, departs from traditional religious scholarship in calling for the reinterpretation of certain Qur'ānic verses to effectively address new problems in the light of fundamental Qur'ānic teachings (Newslite 2001). Independent women preachers without any organizational apparatus

Until recently, preaching in large-group settings was a male prerogative in Bangladesh, where the majority of Muslims follow the Hanafī tradition, which discourages women from going to the mosque because of its public character. However, some Bangladeshi women preachers, mostly elderly, are now contesting, more in practice than in discourse, the locally dominant fatwā or religious legal opinion that women should not go to the mosque or lead women's congregational prayers even in private spaces.

CONCLUSION

Many changes are underway in South Asia as women carve out authoritative spaces for themselves in religious space (though without erecting formal challenges to male authority). Scholars such as Mary Elaine Hegland (1998) argue that integration of women into the religio-political world may allow consolidation of new forms of male control, but one might also point to how many Jamaat-affiliated students, for instance, contest Islamist prescriptions in creative and non-confrontational ways even while striving to remake themselves into loyal Islamist subjects.

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