



Women, Knowledge, and Reform: The Historical Emergence of Girls' Madrasas in India

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Abstract

Education is one of the central instruments of social mobility, yet for Muslim girls in India, access to it is shaped by a mix of gender norms, religious identity, and structural inequality. This paper traces the historical emergence and contemporary growth of girls' madrasas in India, examines what draws families to enroll their daughters in them, and considers how these institutions function at once as sites of religious learning, gendered socialization, identity formation, and educational opportunity.

The study draws on a critical review of existing literature, government reports, census data, and published empirical research, read through an intersectional sociological lens that attends to how gender, class, religion, and region combine to shape Muslim girls' educational paths. The central argument is that girls' madrasas resist any simple reading as instruments of either empowerment or exclusion. They have expanded educational access and religious literacy for many girls, but they also carry the weight of community aspiration, economic constraint, cultural expectation, and concern for respectability. Rather than treating madrasas as a lesser substitute for secular schooling, the paper places them within larger debates on educational justice, minority rights, and gendered citizenship in India.

This sociological account of Muslim girls' education contributes to ongoing conversations about inclusive schooling for minorities. It suggests that policy responses to educational inequality need to move past deficit framings and reckon with the social realities within which Muslim girls actually negotiate education, identity, and aspiration.

Keywords: education, gender, identity, inequality, Muslim girls

Introduction

The history of madrasa education in India is bound up with the history of Muslim communities themselves, with the institutionalization of Islamic learning, and with the way religious tradition has been carried from one generation to the next. Madrasas have long served as the place where religious knowledge is preserved, disseminated, and made legitimate, a function that goes well beyond their narrower image as centres of religious instruction. They have shaped religious subjectivities, sustained communal identities, and produced the scholarly traditions that continue to influence Muslim societies across time and place.

The spread of Islam in the Indian subcontinent carried with it an intellectual tradition that placed real weight on the pursuit of knowledge, or *ilm*. Within that tradition, knowledge functions as both a religious obligation and a source of moral authority. Out of this grew the *ulama*, who came to be seen as custodians of religious knowledge and interpreters of sacred texts. Through training in Quranic exegesis, Hadith, jurisprudence, and theology, the *ulama* occupied a privileged position in defining orthodoxy and setting the boundaries of legitimate religious interpretation. Institutions such as mosques, *maktabs*, *khanqahs*, and madrasas became the central sites where this learning was cultivated and where scholarly traditions were reproduced, transmitting religious teaching while also forming interpretive communities and networks of religious authority.

A sociological reading of religious education has to go further than curriculum and pedagogy. Educational institutions are also places where particular kinds of knowledge come to be seen as legitimate, and where authority is produced and reproduced socially rather than simply handed down. Who gets to interpret sacred texts, who certifies religious expertise, whose knowledge counts as authentic: these questions cannot be separated from the transmission of religious knowledge itself. The madrasa, in this light, is not just a space of instruction. It is also an institution that produces and regulates what counts as legitimate religious knowledge.

The authority of the *ulama* was sustained through systems of certification, chains of transmission, and institutional recognition, which together produced a distinct religious elite. In this sense, the madrasa has worked as a mechanism for reproducing religious authority within Muslim societies over time.

These processes were never gender-neutral. Islamic history records women's participation in the transmission of religious knowledge, but the formal structures of religious scholarship and authority remained largely closed to them. Women's access to advanced religious learning, to positions of scholarly authority, and to recognized interpretive traditions has generally been filtered through broader social and cultural norms governing gender relations. The study of girls' madrasas, then, raises questions about how education, gender, and religious authority intersect. This paper gives a historical account of Muslim education in India, and it uses that history to build the sociological framework needed to understand why girls' madrasas matter and how they sit within a wider hierarchy of religious knowledge and authority.

Ilm and Islamic Epistemology: Knowledge, Gender, and Authority

The Quran commands the pursuit of knowledge, or *ilm*, without ever settling on a single definition for the term. In its dictionary sense, *ilm* means to know something deservedly, to recognize, to perceive reality, to hold a firm belief, to sense, to learn well. The Quran treats *ilm* as hierarchical and ultimately controlled by God: the word is used for God's own knowledge, which exceeds human knowledge and extends to “secret matters” (Q 6:59; 11:31). All human knowledge is said to originate with God (Q 2:140), and even the angels acknowledge that God has taught them (Q 2:32); divine knowledge becomes knowable only when God wills

it (Q 2:255–256). The person who perceives reality in this sense is called an alim, and ulama are those whose knowledge runs deep and firm enough to be called scholars of Islam.

Education is a duty in Islam, addressed to men and women alike. Ibn Khaldun argued that a person acquires knowledge, moral belief, and virtue partly through exchange and revelation and partly by copying a model and receiving direct instruction (Ibn Khaldun, 2008). For him, education worked on the mind and on moral character at the same time.

Ilm in Islamic thought is not simply an intellectual pursuit; it carries moral and spiritual weight. The Quranic command iqra, “read,” places learning at the centre of human development, and prophetic sayings reinforce this by framing the pursuit of knowledge as an obligation for every Muslim, regardless of gender.

Sociologically, this suggests that Islamic epistemology is not exclusionary in its foundational form. Knowledge is not stratified by gender in how it is first articulated, and ilm is not limited to religious instruction. Historically it has stretched across philosophy, medicine, mathematics, and the social sciences, which complicates the common assumption that women's education in Muslim contexts is mainly about moral or domestic training.

The more useful sociological question, though, is not what Islam prescribes but how knowledge becomes socially organized. The sociology of knowledge holds that knowledge is always shaped by power relations, institutions, and historical conditions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Ilm as a concept may be universal, but who gets access to it, what it contains, and what counts as legitimate are matters society decides.

Early Islamic history bears this out. Women were not excluded from intellectual life: Aisha bint Abu Bakr, for instance, played a central role in transmitting hadith and was recognized as an authority on legal and theological questions (Sayeed, 2013; Nadwi, 2007). Women taught male students, took part in scholarly networks, and contributed to religious discourse at a time when religious authority had not yet hardened into fixed institutions. The relative openness of early Islamic society left room for more fluid participation, women included.

That openness narrowed as Islamic empires expanded and formal institutions of learning took shape. As religious scholarship professionalized into a distinct ulama class, women were gradually pushed out of recognized centres of authority, even as they went on engaging with knowledge informally.

The Making of Madrasa Education in India

Madrasas have occupied a central place in the intellectual, religious, and social life of Muslim communities in South Asia. They grew out of early mosque-based circles of learning and gradually became institutionalized centres for transmitting religious knowledge, legal tradition, and scholarly authority. The word madrasa comes from the Arabic root darasa, to study, and traditionally referred to institutions that taught Quranic sciences, Hadith, jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (kalam), logic, philosophy, and language.

Madrasa education in India grew alongside the expansion of Muslim political rule during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods. Rulers, nobles, and religious elites endowed institutions of learning through waqf, which allowed scholarly networks to develop across the subcontinent. Madrasas were not only sites of religious instruction; they were also where legitimate knowledge and authority were produced and passed on. Sufi khanqahs, alongside mosques, did similar work in spreading Islamic learning and shaping religious identity among diverse populations.

Sociologically, madrasas were mechanisms through which religious knowledge was organized, authorized, and reproduced, not simply schools. Systems of instruction, certification, and scholarly lineage helped form the ulama as a distinct class of religious specialists, which meant that access to religious knowledge became bound up with questions of authority, legitimacy, and social status.

Colonial rule reshaped this system considerably. British educational policy favoured English-language instruction and Western knowledge over existing systems of Islamic learning. As English replaced Persian in administration and education, many traditional scholars lost ground, and established paths of social mobility shifted. Madrasas came to be seen by colonial authorities as traditional and backward, even though they went on preserving religious knowledge and communal identity much as before.

Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars responded to colonial educational reform in different ways. The Aligarh Movement pushed for engagement with modern scientific education, while Darul Uloom Deoband placed its emphasis on preserving classical Islamic scholarship. Bareilvi, Nadwatul Ulama, and Shia educational networks each developed their own approach to religious authority, curriculum, and community formation, and none of this was uniform: Muslim educational responses to colonial modernity reflected competing ideas about religious authenticity and social reform. Madaris, for the most part, settled into a role confined to religious education, and the divide between worldly (secular) and religious learning hardened. Even so, madaris following the Deobandi syllabus kept a strong emphasis on the rational sciences (ma'qulat); subjects such as sirat (the Prophet's biography), aqeeda (core Islamic beliefs), and hadith were added only gradually.

For Shia communities, particularly around Lucknow and Hyderabad, educational institutions became a way of preserving Ja'fari jurisprudence, devotional practice, and scholarly ties to centres of learning in Iraq and Iran. Madrasa education, in these settings, did more than transmit religious knowledge: it reproduced sectarian identity and kept distinct traditions of authority alive.

Independence and Partition gave madrasas renewed importance for many Muslim communities. The political uncertainty of the post-Partition years sharpened concerns about cultural preservation, religious continuity, and minority identity. Constitutional protections for minority educational institutions let madrasas continue operating independently, though debates over modernization, curriculum reform, and state regulation never really went away.

Muslim Women's Education and the Rise of Girls' Madrasas

Girls are not educated alongside boys in the ordinary madrasa system. Maktabas are coeducational in the early years, but once girls reach puberty they are generally kept from going out and are expected to remain in seclusion. Still, the need to educate girls was recognized early on. Sayyid Ahmad Khan had at first intended to admit girls to the MAO College at Aligarh, but strong opposition from the ulama forced him to abandon the proposal, which left separate madrasas for girls as the only real alternative. Girls' madrasas might be affiliated with a particular sect, but their syllabus and day-to-day functioning would still differ from boys' madrasas of the same order. Jamiat-al-Falah in Azamgarh was the first madrasa for girls, followed soon after by one in Rampur, and the number of such institutions has grown considerably since, though no reliable count of them exists.

This growth has to be read against the wider question of Muslim girls' access to education in India. Anita Nuna's fieldwork in four districts of Uttar Pradesh found that the educational exclusion of Muslim girls cannot be explained by religion alone; poverty, weak educational infrastructure, gender norms, and parental anxiety about safety combine to shape whether girls stay in school (Nuna, 2013). Mareike Jule

Winkelman's ethnography of a Tablighi Jama'at-affiliated madrasa in Delhi, one of the earliest studies of its kind in India, found that these institutions do more than instruct: the cultivation of adab, piety, modesty, and moral discipline sits at the centre of what a girls' madrasa is meant to do, carried as much through everyday routine and conduct as through the stated curriculum (Winkelman, 2005).

The history of Muslim women's education in India is also tied to broader currents of social reform, religious identity, and gender relations, currents usually told through the work of male reformers such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. That framing tends to obscure the specific struggles and institutions that opened education to Muslim women in the first place. Girls' madrasas and women's religious schooling were not simply an extension of general Muslim educational reform; Muslim women became, in their own right, the subject of educational intervention, moral reform, and community aspiration.

Through the nineteenth century, as Mughal authority declined and British rule consolidated, Muslim intellectuals grew increasingly concerned about educational backwardness, but the terms of the debate were gendered from the start. Modern education for men was justified through employment and political participation; women's education, by contrast, was argued for through family, morality, and the preservation of religious values. Female literacy stayed extremely low, and seclusion, patriarchal norms, and restricted mobility kept formal schooling out of reach for most women.

The Bengal Renaissance shaped much of this debate, even though it is remembered mostly for Hindu reform movements. Muslim intellectuals in Bengal took up questions of social reform, female literacy, and educational access too, and out of these debates came a new picture of womanhood in which educated women were seen as necessary for the community's moral and cultural progress.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was among the most influential voices making this case. Writing in the early twentieth century, she challenged the assumption that women were intellectually inferior and belonged outside public life. Her *Sultana's Dream* (1905) imagined a world turned on its head, where women held authority and men lived in seclusion, and used that inversion to criticize patriarchal arrangements more broadly. Rokeya treated education as the route through which Muslim women could develop themselves and take part in society, and her writing questioned restrictive readings of purdah while pointing to what literacy and learning could do for women. Sociologically, her interventions were an early critique of gendered power and helped shape alternative visions of Muslim womanhood grounded in education and intellectual agency.

The Aligarh Movement mattered institutionally too, even though Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's own reforms were aimed mainly at Muslim men. His project laid intellectual groundwork that later initiatives for women's education could build on. In 1906, Sheikh Abdullah and his wife Wahid Jahan Begum opened a girls' school in Aligarh meant to give Muslim women access to education without violating prevailing norms of purdah and respectability. That institution marked an important step in formalizing Muslim women's education and showed that reform could work within, rather than against, existing social frameworks.

Other efforts followed a similar path. Sultan Jahan Begum of Bhopal became one of South Asia's most important patrons of Muslim women's education, and educational institutions for girls expanded considerably under her support. The *Purdahnashin Madrasa*, established in Calcutta in 1913, tried to reconcile educational access with the realities of female seclusion, an arrangement that let families educate their daughters without treating education as a threat to religious or cultural norms. Schools and madrasas of this kind show how reform for Muslim women usually proceeded through negotiation with existing social structures rather than confrontation with them.

Girls' madrasas need to be understood against this backdrop. Boys' madrasas were mainly concerned with producing religious scholars and preserving Islamic learning; girls' madrasas, by contrast, tended to combine religious instruction with the cultivation of gendered moral identity. Their curricula centred on Quranic study, Urdu literacy, religious ethics, ritual practice, and instructional texts meant to shape ideal Muslim womanhood, among which Ashraf Ali Thanawi's *Bihishti Zewar* was especially influential in teaching conduct, family responsibility, and religious obligation (Metcalf, 1990). Through this teaching, girls' madrasas produced and reproduced particular forms of femininity, piety, and social respectability, and not simply literacy or religious knowledge on their own.

This is also where the sociological weight of these institutions becomes clear. Education inside a girls' madrasa is not only about transmitting religious knowledge; it forms moral selves. Students learn to embody particular kinds of piety, modesty, discipline, and communal belonging, a process close to what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*: a system of embodied dispositions through which people come to understand and move through the social world (Bourdieu, 1977). At the same time, these institutions cultivate collective religious identity across generations, built on shared religious tradition, communal history, and moral value. That process does not settle into something fixed. Students are continually working out how their religious commitments sit alongside educational ambition, family expectation, and the demands of contemporary life, so that girls' madrasas end up as places where several identities, as Muslims, women, students, daughters, and future professionals, are negotiated together rather than resolved into one.

The expansion of girls' madrasa education gathered pace after Independence. Historically, Muslim women acquired religious knowledge at home, through mosque circles, Sufi networks, and women's religious gatherings, but the twentieth century saw the gradual rise of formal institutions built specifically for female religious education. In many regions, girls' madrasas offered one of the few socially acceptable routes through which Muslim women could pursue education while staying within culturally valued norms of gender segregation and religious propriety, and some of the women who passed through them went on to become teachers, preachers, and religious educators in their own communities.

Structural Inequality and the Educational Choices of Muslim Families

Muslim educational participation in India has long been shaped by inequalities that go well beyond religious affiliation on its own. Gender, class, minority status, regional disparity, and unequal access to infrastructure all intersect in the educational experience of Muslim girls specifically. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) found that Muslims lag behind the national average on several educational indicators, and that Muslim women fare worse still, with lower literacy, lower educational attainment, and more limited access to higher education, driven not simply by poverty but by the way gender, religion, class, and region compound one another.

These inequalities are not reducible to conservative religious belief, as public discussion often assumes. Sociological research points instead to poverty, residential segregation, poor schooling infrastructure, discrimination within educational institutions, parental anxiety about girls' mobility, and thin employment prospects, all of which shape how families decide whether and where to send their daughters to school. Muslim families are typically weighing aspirations for upward mobility against concerns about safety, morality, and cultural continuity, not choosing one over the other outright.

Girls' madrasas sit within this picture as one option among several. For many families they offer free or low-cost education, boarding, meals, books, and religious instruction in a socially acceptable setting, particularly where private schooling is unaffordable or government schools are inadequate. Enrolment in a

girls' madrasa, then, is less an expression of religious conservatism than a reasonable response to the economic and institutional conditions a family is working within, a distinction that matters for moving past accounts that treat Muslim communities as uniformly resistant to modern schooling.

The decision itself tends to rest on several considerations at once rather than any single motive. Economic constraint is often the most decisive: many girls' madrasas provide free tuition, boarding, food, books, and religious instruction, which makes them reachable for households that could not otherwise afford private schooling or that live where government schools are inadequate.

Religious aspiration matters too. Parents commonly want their daughters to receive formal Islamic education: knowledge of the Quran and Hadith, familiarity with ritual practice, and moral values consistent with community expectation. Religious schooling, in this sense, functions as both preparation for religious life and an investment in character and family standing.

Gender norms shape the decision further. Worries about a daughter's safety, her mobility, contact with unrelated men, and the maintenance of modesty push many parents toward gender-segregated institutions, and girls' madrasas are often seen as places that deliver education without conflicting with prevailing expectations of femininity and respectability.

Aspirations, though, have shifted in recent decades. Many families now want religious education to sit alongside opportunities for higher study, teaching careers, community leadership, and wider social participation, which has pushed contemporary girls' madrasas toward a more hybrid space where religious learning meets ambitions for mobility and community development.

Conclusion

Girls' madrasas hold a distinctive place in India's educational landscape. Their continued growth reflects more than religious revival; it speaks to unresolved questions about educational access, minority rights, gendered citizenship, and community identity. Making sense of these institutions means moving past a debate that casts madrasas as either backward or unambiguously empowering, when they are neither.

A sociological view shows Muslim girls' educational experience as shaped by overlapping structures of gender, religion, class, and regional disadvantage. Within those constraints, girls' madrasas are spaces where education, religious learning, and identity formation come together in ways that are not easily separated. They reproduce cultural tradition even as they open new room for women's participation in religious and educational life, and the two are bound up together rather than working against each other.

Policy aimed at improving Muslim girls' education needs to take account of this diversity rather than lean on deficit-oriented assumptions about the community. Expanding access to quality education matters, but so does recognizing the cultural, religious, and economic realities within which Muslim girls actually negotiate their aspirations. Girls' madrasas deserve to be treated as real actors within India's plural system of minority education, not read simply through a lens of exclusion or of reform imposed from outside.

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