Messengers and Media Messages:
Learning and Knowledge of Muslim Women in India

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Introduction

1. Across South Asia, women's and girls' educational attainments are widely regarded as a signifier of progress. The relationship between religion, gender and modernity projects however, remains contentious.[1] Muslim women's lives in India are often misleadingly problematised as educationally backward and 'unmodern' because of their religion,[2] a view that overlooks the complex social, political and historical processes including the persistent traces of postcolonisation that set in train vast differences in access to education.[3] Low literacy and poor access to educational facilities are serious issues confronting high proportions of Muslim women and girls, especially in rural areas. These are shaped by uneven elementary and higher educational infrastructure, poverty and, in some cases, cultural values that constrain women's mobility in public spaces. Long-term low participation generates polarised discourses around formal education as either the key to liberating women from oppressive cultural restrictions, or as a tool of western imperialiasm.[4] Frequently missing in these debates is an engagement with Indian Muslim women's and girls' own knowledge constructions, and what learning means for them. Constructivist approaches to Indian Muslim women's learning—and to education more widely—emphasise the crucial interplay between non-formal and formal types of learning. Focusing on non-formal types of learning, the question that drives this paper is 'how do Indian Muslim women approach knowledge and learning, and what do their diverse pursuits of learning demonstrate?' The paper draws on the methodology of meta-ethnography to contrast two very different ethnographic studies of Indian Muslim women-scholars' constructions of knowledge: a South Indian vernacular woman healer; and New Delhi university undergraduate young women. I find that in both cases learning is deeply entwined with embodiment, with gender, and with religious identity in the interplay of India's religious and ethnic pluralism.

Background

2. Providing an historical context helps us to understand some of the current circumstances of Indian Muslim women's learning experiences. The impact of British rule, was to destroy most of the basis upon which Islamic society in India had rested.[5] The question of how Islamic society could be sustained in the face of colonial domination resulted in the emergence of several schools of thought—most notably, the 'modernists' of the Aligarh movement[6] and the 'revivalists' of the Deoband movement.[7] The Aligarh 'modernists' favoured English education alongside Urdu, as a means of enabling Muslims to access employment with the British authorities. They also advocated reinterpretation of non-core aspects of Islam in the light of contemporary social and scientific knowledge. The Deoband 'revivalists' favoured returning to engagement with earlier texts and traditions of the Prophet, largely shunning state influences.[8] Despite their theological differences, 'revivalist' and 'modernist' thinkers were similar in seeing education as a key means of self-rescuing Indian Muslims from the disparagements of colonial rule.

3. In colonial and then postcolonial India, the education of women through women's advice literature, became integral to a larger corpus of Islamic reform literature, which implied a kind of 'great tradition': Islam shorn of its parochial referents. The Indian 'reformed woman' (both Hindu and Muslim) shouldered considerable responsibility for internal reform: expunging vernacular religious impurities, gentrifying and refining the language and manners of their family members, and creating hygienic and ordered domestic environments.[9] To some extent, women's advice literature was responding to hostile colonial and missionary discourses that portrayed Indian women as the 'backward' victims of cruel traditions.[10] As Gail Minault describes, women's reformation was deeply connected with the rise of India's printing presses.[11] At the same time, Golden Age myths provided respite from the 'oppressive present' of colonial subjugation through references to a glorious departed era—the early days of Indian Islam—when women were educated and respected. Such appeals facilitated a critique of the 'civilising mission' that served to justify colonial intrusion into everyday Indian life and afforded self-respect in the face of colonial contemptuousness.[12]

4. For Kumkum Sangari, reform agendas 'functioned to school Indian women, Muslim and Hindu alike, as status markers and class agents.' The 'acquisition of moral wifely power by reformed women rested not on othering women from different denominations but on othering women "below".'[13] Similarly, Charu Gupta regarded reforming the domestic arena as a cross-denomination *class* project, withdrawing 'respectable' women from the influences of westernised popular culture, and disciplining and cleansing their cultural world.[14] Incidentally, this generated heightened concerns about the infringement of *parda* (women's seclusion), and the paradoxical greater male intrusion and surveillance over the cultural forms of *parda*,[15] which meant that girls in 'respectable families' were unlikely to leave their homes for educational purposes and even being educated at home could only be achieved in the face of considerable opposition.

5. For poor and rural Muslim women and girls, aspirational middle-class norms of female withdrawal into *parda* were subsumed by more immediate demands on women's and girls' daily labour—and economic disadvantage confronted a large proportion of Muslims who remained in post-partition India. For poorer Muslim women then, the primary obstacle to pursuing formal education was not *parda*,. It was women's and girls' primary involvement in work to support their families. With the economic and political decline of many Indian Muslims during colonisation and increasingly after partition (when most Muslim elites exited India) many Indian Muslims resided in areas with poor educational opportunities. Intermittent eruptions of Hindu–Muslim religious tension in some locales further exacerbated women's and girls' positions, curtailing mobility—an additional hindrance to their chances of going to school. These combined factors contributed to the stark disadvantages of Muslim women and girls in formal education.[16] It also means there are few ethnographies of Muslim women as learners in either formal or non-formal settings.

Meta-ethnography

6. In this paper, I compare and synthesise two very different ethnographies that share a focus on Indian–Muslim women and their approaches to learning. The settings of both are urban university campus residential enclaves: one in Hyderabad; the other in South Delhi. In each I explore how Muslim women develop their understandings as they interact in Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. The women subjects in both cases are scholarly in some way; an avid scholar of vernacular Islamic healing knowledge, in one case, and current university undergraduates in another. I focus on their non-formal learning in the context of the ways in which they develop their identities amidst India's Muslim–non-Muslim relations; in particular how they situate their own identities as women.

7. The methodological approach of this paper is inspired by meta-ethnography. George Noblit and Dwight Hare[17] laid the foundations of meta-ethnography in education research as a method for selecting, reviewing and synthesising the findings of multiple ethnographies in order to provide a higher level of analysis and interpretation not apparent in the original studies.[18] Meta-ethnography uses the *translation* of concepts, idioms, values and norms from one ethnographic account into another/others, which forms the final synthesis.[19] Ethnographic projects are usually realised as primary and singular enterprises documenting the intricate realities people create and the complexities they are involved with in their daily lives.[20] While comparative ethnography has long been a part of anthropology, its potential is underexplored. For Noblit and Hare, meta-ethnography increases the potential of vast amounts of ethnographic research to create an interconnected knowledge base and to inform practice. The concept of 'translation' in meta-ethnography respects the particular *and* enables a higher level comparison and ultimately creates a synthesis of understanding.

8. I begin by outlining the contours of the two selected ethnographies: *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India*, a monograph by Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger,[21] and 'Emerging Muslim identity in India's globalized and mediated society: An ethnographic investigation of the halting modernities of the Muslim Youth of Jamia Enclave, New Delhi', a 2009 doctoral thesis by Tabassum Khan.[22] The first explores how 'vernacular Islam' is lived locally through the lens of an Islamic woman healer in South India. The concerns of the study are gender and religious identity and how vernacular Islamic cosmologies depend on a worldview shared across religious boundaries and which reshapes gender roles.[23] For my meta-ethnographic comparison about Indian Muslim women's knowledge and learning, this study demonstrates the social implications of one Muslim woman's gendered negotiations of authority in the learning, teaching and application of vernacular Islamic healing knowledge. The second study frames India's mass media (including television, the internet and mobile phones) as an under-estimated mode of learning and knowledge construction, and considers how it shapes identity and worldviews amongst young Muslim women in an urban Muslim enclave. I then translate motifs, emerging themes and conclusions from each study to find syntheses about Indian Muslim women's involvement in informal, or non-formal, learning and knowledge in contemporary India, where Muslims, once sovereign, are today a marginalised minority community.

Conceptual frame

9. Frederick Barth points out that 'knowledge' shows a staggering diversity across populations as well as within populations, including developmental, intergenerational and other intra-population differences.[24] For Barth, knowledge includes feelings (attitudes) as well as information, embodied skills, verbal taxonomies and concepts; all the ways of understanding that we use to make up our experienced, grasped reality. Knowledge (and its acquisition/learning) can provide an important framework of comparative ethnographic analysis as: the interplay of a corpus of assertions; a mode of transmission via media (language, symbols, etc.); and the institutional social relations which stake claims on accessibility and authenticity.[25] The selected ethnographies both engage with this interplay in the lives of the women protagonists, making Barth's proposals a useful analytical referent.

10. Emma Cohen too emphasises that knowledge and cognition are embodied processes, inseparable from bodily experiences, social interactions and the environmental contexts within which they are produced.[26] She points out that to satisfactorily address 'how we know' and 'how we come to know', we need more than a single explanatory account. The social and cognitive mechanisms and processes by which different forms of knowledge are generated are multiple, involving different

activating conditions, and producing different outcomes. The traditional cognitive science view that knowledge (and its acquisition/learning) resides neurally, independent of the mode-specific route by which it was acquired, is losing ground. The emerging framework presents cognitive processes such as perception, conception, attention, memory and motivation, as 'grounded' in their physical context. According to this view, knowledge resides in modality-specific neuro-cognitive systems and is reactivated via the partial simulation of the cognitive and bodily states, social interactions and environmental situations that contributed to its acquisition.[27]

11. These ideas help navigate this comparative analysis of the two ethnographies of Muslim women's different forms of knowledge acquisition through non-formal learning modalities: interaction with 'messengers' in the case of our first ethnography; and interaction with mass media and local neighbourhood 'messages' in the second.

In Amma's healing room

12. Amma (d. 2001) was a South Indian Muslim spiritual healer practising a form of vernacular Islam. Amma lived in a residential enclave for non-academic staff attached to Osmania University, Hyderabad, with her husband Abba, who was a retired low-level clerk in the university. She was a *piranima* (wife of a *pir,* Sufi master). The ethnographer, Flueckiger, engaged in extended participant observation with Amma over several years of return visits, conducting ethnographic social analysis with a biographical focus on one woman.

13. Amma was a self-proclaimed lover of learning and was literate in Arabic, and a trained Muslim healer. Yet, because of her gender, Amma had to continually recreate and maintain her authority as a knowledgeable healer, competent to meet the public. At the same time, it is because of her gender that the public came to her, believing she was more attentive and loving than male healers. Gender negotiations at the level of practice were also of concern to Flueckiger's study. Her protagonist, Amma, asserted, 'There are only two castes [*jati*]: men and women. Muslims, Christians, Hindus—they're all the same.'[28]

14. Amma and the women visiting her characterised the 'caste of women' as one filled with suffering and troubles. She often identified with these sufferings of her *jati* as her own. The roles of a woman homemaker in her fertile years and of an Islamic healer were generally perceived as mutually exclusive by the women in Amma's healing room. So Amma typically saw herself as an exception and wrestled with her conflicting roles by giving different versions of when she took up healing in relation to the births of her eleven children.[29]

15. Citing Carolyn Heilbrun's work,[30] Flueckiger, notes the difficulty in writing about women's lives since the *models* for biographies have historically been male. Models provide a safety net, or a context for biographical writing, from which to draw energy and inspiration. Amma's biographical narratives (written observationally by Flueckiger and Amma's own oral self-narratives), suggest Amma too lacked such a safety net; an existing model of female authority in Islamic religious healing knowledge and action in the public domain, on which to connect her own unusual and innovative position. So instead of characterising her own healing work as fulfilling the potential of her gender, Amma mostly articulated it in terms of her own exceptionalism, saying 'I have the form of a woman but the heart of a man'.[31] Her only models of public spiritual authority were male, and it was within this paradigm that she negotiated a position for herself as a female religious authority and healer.

16. As well as these gender issues, the ethnography probes the question, 'What makes an Islamic healing system popular across religious boundaries?' This is a significant question in considering

Indian Muslim women's daily interactions within the sometimes fraught Muslim–non-Muslim worlds. Amma's answer is that in the healing room these boundaries collapse. Flueckiger suggests that the religiously diverse patients who came to Amma's healing room shared a common cosmology that articulates healing via a spiritual idiom. In this shared world view, where spiritual forces and entities affect human conditions, rigid religious boundaries are porous.

Amma's learning and knowledge: Embedded in relationships

17. Amma emphasised her ongoing relationship with learning, telling the ethnographer/scholar, Flueckiger:

    > I'm like you. I love to learn … One should always keep on learning. Even now, I have a great passion to go on increasing my knowledge. One should learn everything one can.[32]

    > Joice [*sic*], no matter how many books you write, even then, it will be too little, there will still be knowledge that is not included. Leaving my small children, that's all I did: write, write, write. Twenty-five years have passed. But even then, I haven't learned everything. So no matter how much you write, it won't be enough. Even if you used all the trees in the universe as pens, even then.[33]

18. The vernacular Islamic knowledge, and its praxis in Amma's healing room was shaped by a series of relationships. As Amma's husband, Abba, often rhetorically asked, 'What is the most important thing? Love. Love is the most important thing.'[34]

19. In this Sufi idiom, Amma also frequently emphasised the importance of her relationships with Allah and with her *Pir* Master, who taught her the mechanics of the healing system, the numerical system of *abjad.* She stressed that it is a mechanical system that must be infused with personal spiritual authority, knowledge and love.

    > Do you know what happened once? When I was playing with my breath [meditating], I had a vision of my guru, a vision of light [*rosni*]. From this, love was born. Love comes from light [*bijli,* the same word as electricity and lightning]. When I'm talking to you, it's not me talking, but my light. Everything is light [*rosni*]; without light, I wouldn't exist, you wouldn't exist. Allah is light [*bijli*]; He is radiance [*nur*].[35]

20. Flueckiger describes how, after learning the mechanics of healing from her master, Amma sat for forty days to garner her spiritual strength and authority. And once she developed a certain measure of strength, she got the authority to call upon various *maukil,* or messengers (angels, saints, *jinn* and Hindu deities) to carry out her commands in her healing practice: to find a lost child; to take away one or another kind of evil eye; to lift a fever. Knowledge and learning for Amma were inextricably connected with nurturing appropriate relationships with messengers along with understanding the mechanics of a system.

21. Many illnesses and troubles brought to Amma's healing table were difficulties in relationships, or the results of inappropriate relationships—between humans, and between humans and spiritual beings. Amma's prescriptions severed or balanced human and spiritual relationships. Her practice accounted for and incorporated the relationships of family and the wider social network within which a patient lives.

22. It is the inter-religious relationships and shared idioms of knowledge which Flueckiger, as an ethnographer, found most revealing in analysing Amma's work. She describes the healing room as a *chaurasta,* or crossroad, in the Indian common sense, where, crossroads are not personal (as in the common western metaphor for an individual confronting a personal dilemma), nor are crossroads domestic. They are *public* hubs of activity, replete with landmarks. Amma's healing room was such a crossroads: a public meeting place across religious identities. It was a place of

emergent shared understandings about health and illness between the Muslims, Hindus and Christians who congregated there, and whose differences, Amma declared, were non-existent.

23. The second ethnography researches a very different form of informal knowledge and learning of contemporary Muslim women. Although published just three years after the ethnography of Amma, the women in the next study are at least a generation younger. At the time of the study they were all undergraduates which shaped their approaches to non-formal learning in ways that contrast with Amma's pursuits and application of healing knowledge. Khan's study illustrates rapid changes reshaping young Indian–Muslim women's perspectives and experiences. Although both studies are set in university residential enclaves, Flueckiger regarded Amma's neighbourhood of subsidised housing for non-academic university employees as a significant liminal social space: it is not traditionally Muslim or Hindu; its inhabitants are both; and no-one there had deep ancestral ties to the area. These factors may have provided a certain freedom of access and activity that does not hold true of more traditional neighbourhoods. By contrast, the Jamia University enclave increasingly provides refuge for Muslims who seek economic and social security. Thus the women's everyday experiences of the social spaces of their neighbourhood shaped their informal learning in distinctive ways.

Emerging Muslim youth identities in a globalised, mediated society

24. Khan's ethnography investigates the learning, and sense-making of Muslim youth—particularly women university students—of the Jamia enclave in South Delhi, through their engagement with Indian and global mass media: television, the internet and mobile phones.

25. Within cultural studies, there are copious analyses of media texts, but there are far fewer ethnographic studies of how media is received. Khan's thesis explores the under-researched topic of media reception as a mode of learning and knowledge construction about self-identity and the world amongst Muslim youth, especially young women, as a marginalised minority in India.

26. She documents how the young urban women of Jamia negotiate two opposing streams of epistemology: from the religious and cultural ideology of their segregated Muslim community, and from Indian and global media content. Gender is a critical factor for Khan. She is interested in how gender embodies understandings of how both streams of media (and community) messages are constructed; and how they are received by the women of the study.

27. Khan critiques how Islamic sensibilities are often presented in opposition to modernity: Jihad vs McWorld (fundamentalism vs capitalism). This genre of studies tends to foreground the withdrawal of Muslims and the reenergising of fundamentalist religiosity in response to Muslim perceptions of failed postcolonial nationalism and global economic marginalisation. Khan presents a more nuanced ethnography of young Muslim women's engagement with the media, and their resultant sense-making about self-identity and emplacement. She recounted that the young women of her research expressed strong and clear ambitions which they shared as members of the wider Indian society. They were moving out of, or reframing, the terms of Islamic women's seclusion, vis-à-vis India as a media-connected sphere, largely propelled by the media's messages of consumerism and neo-liberal nationalism. At the same time, however, the women remained intimately identified with their community.

Two streams of knowledge authority: *Apna Mahol* and media narratives

Apna Mahol

28. As Khan describes, a road divides two South Delhi neighbourhoods. On one side the non-segregated, but mainly Hindu suburb has broad, sanitised tree-filled streets with shiny cars outside most homes. On the other is the Jamia enclave, a labyrinth of crisscrossing narrow streets and passageways, congested with pedestrians and cycle rickshaws.

29. The 2006 Sachar Committee,[36] illuminating in its documentation of Muslim marginalisation, found Muslims lived in overcrowded segregated neighbourhoods largely because of prejudice. As one of Khan's informants, a woman BBC journalist from Jamia, reported, her family had previously lived in a middle-class non-segregated neighbourhood, but shortly after the Babri Masjid riots,[37] their home was attacked and they were threatened and abused as 'filthy Muslims'. They have lived in Jamia ever since, with no plans to relocate.

30. Jamia initially sprung up as a residential enclave for the adjacent Jamia Milia Islamia University campus, and many residents settled here precisely because of the Islamic tertiary and schooling educational facilities it offers their children. However with housing demand outstripping supply, the Jamia enclave now serves a far wider range of Muslim accommodation needs: for Muslims who want to live in an Islamic milieu; for Muslims from interstate; for rural migrants seeking employment in the city; for low-income Muslim families who cannot find affordable accommodation elsewhere in Delhi; for Muslim families seeking greater security in face of communal violence.

31. '*Mahol*' means surroundings/environment in Urdu. Khan's Jamia enclave informants use the term to refer to life within this Muslim enclave. *Apna mahol* (our own environment) encompasses relationships of belonging *and* acquiescence to norms, values and obligations, including religious obligations. The distinguishing features of the Jamia *mahol* are the mosques, *madrasas*, Islamic eateries and the Azan call for prayer echoing from one after another mosque's loudspeaker, punctuating the times of the day. At which point the streets empty and a hush falls across the streetscapes for a few minutes. Khan describes how Jamia youth are expected to be embodiments of *adab* (etiquette), young women more so. They have to negotiate additional expectations of gender segregation and modest comportment as part of *mahol.*

Media Narratives

32. Through their engagement with mass media in its various forms, gendered youth are redefining this *apna mahol.* As the ethnographer rightly notes, within one generation households in Jamia have gone from exposure to one or two state television channels, with few homes possessing a television, to pervasive household access to hundreds of global and Indian television channels, as well as to the internet, via affordable pay-as-you-go internet cafes, and personal mobile phone media. The youth and young women of Jamia inhabit a radically different mediated environment to that of their parents. In this mediated environment, Urdu language, the repository of Muslim ethos and ideology, is in decline amongst the young women and men of Khan's study. Consequently, their connections to *adab* are weaker. They are, by and large, less concerned with this loss and more interested in reducing the distance between their world and the rest of Indian society. Khan found that many of her research participants are comfortable sublimating religious identity to Indian national identity as long as aspirations for economic assimilation are fulfilled.

33. Indian media narratives prominently feature the rich, celebrities, films and fashion, and crime; thus, downplaying the harsh, banal realities of urban and rural India, such as urban pollution, lack of civic amenities and the rural agricultural economic decline. Media bias against on-the-ground life, in favour of a reiteration of India's global success and great potential sends messages of a resurgence of nationalism, through slogans like 'Team India'; slogans that the young women with

whom Khan spoke readily endorsed.

34. *Chak De India* (Go for it, India), is a film based on a fictional story inspired by the victory of the Indian national women's hockey team at the 2002 Commonwealth Games. The film explored themes of sexism, the legacy of partition, and ethnic and religious prejudices. In a thesis chapter dedicated to her analysis of participants' reception of the film, Khan identified a strikingly divergent intergenerational response to the film's messages. Khan and her older age peers read the film as ground-breaking in its subtle, under-stated references to everyday communal prejudices experienced by Indian–Muslims, and the inclusion of Urdu language at points within the film. The younger generation of university students however, read the film in quite a different way, with no comments at all on the above elements. They foregrounded the film's message that for 'Team-India' to achieve success on the global stage; all diverse language, religious and other identities will have to be subsumed into a national identity. The student research participants by and large endorsed this message without offering any critical commentary.

35. Like the older generation, however, the young university student women research participants expressed cynicism and distress at common media portrayals of Muslims as backward, and more latterly, terrorists. Yet they were reluctant to engage head on with negative, and increasingly charged portrayals of Muslims, or the lack of space accorded to them in the mediasphere. Rather, the young students adopted strategies of silence and used words like 'patience'.

36. The media's enticing reiteration of the Indian economy's potential was able to convince them only because the economy is evidently expanding and transforming with neo-liberalisation, and as university students, not yet in the workforce, they trusted that the liberalised economy would provide enough jobs for them.

37. Gender is a vital factor in women's learning via media narratives. Khan identifies a hybrid femininity of the 'new Indian woman' that 'balances [the] authentic Indian woman with consumption of Western products and lifestyle options; marking her body with marketing strategies.'[38] She noted that though her participants may not have been perceptive enough to deconstruct the underlying materialism of the 'new Indian woman', they vehemently expressed their concern that they did not want to be marginalised on three counts—gender, religious minority status *and* economic status—instead of only gender and religion. In this regard, they were actively learning ways of embodying upper-middle-class pan-Indian consumer norms from the media.

Hybrid Identity

38. Khan uses the trope of 'hybrid identity' to frame her participants' learning from media, yet she critiques postcolonial studies' notions of 'the hybrid' as largely celebratory.[39] For although Jamia's youth do participate in the media-generated 'imaginaires' of a cosmopolitan consumerist Indian society, she doubts whether this matches Arjun Appadurai's notion of a hybrid subjectivity which better describes elite, educated *transnational* Indians, confident on the global social and intellectual stage. Such cultural hybrids are able to appropriate, imitate, translate and access other worlds through consumption. Though Jamia's young women aspire to consume, with their lower-middle class and segregated status, they mostly lack the ability or resources to effectively mimic and reformulate the representations they encounter in the media. Moreover, the notion of cultural hybrid does not account for young people's reticent silence and withdrawal from open discussions of their Muslim identities, which could be a sign of their alienation from larger Indian society.

39. However, Khan proposes to revive the 'hybrid' frame by incorporating ideas from Mikhail Bakhtin and Victor Turner. She explores the way that Bakhtin describes the evolution of language: two

languages coming together in hybrid utterances are neither a smooth encounter, nor a fluid movement. Their encounter involves opposition, struggle, stratification and hierarchy, and is stilted.[40] Further, Turner's notion of the liminal as disconnected from one state; not yet connected to another[41] comes closest to describing the conditions of the Muslim youth of Jamia from Khan's perspective. The women's learning through media messages prompted their desire to foreground their nationalist identity, yet it did not mean they had given up their Islamic identity. As the Jamia Muslim women interacted with and constructed knowledge in relation to two streams of knowledge: *apna mahol* and media narratives of consumerism and 'Team India', Khan concluded that their identity could be described as a cultural hybridity in both a Turneresque and Bakhtinian sense of halting, betwixt and between expressions.

Discussion and comparison

40. Barth's notions of knowledge as a comparative analytical frame explores mutually determining interconnections between corpuses of assertions and ideas about the world, media of communication and application of these ideas, and the institutional social relations that lay claims on access, authoritative knowledge and its social application. The non-formal knowledge and learning of the Indian Muslim women compared in this paper, though varying across time, age-cohort, place and media within India, share underlying patterns of women's gendered identity negotiation. These gender negotiations are profoundly entangled with how the respective protagonists make sense of living in a pluralist society in which they are economically and socially marginalised. Each of the selected ethnographies expands our understanding of Indian–Muslim women's learning and knowledge construction by exploring non-formal types of learning, which offer important grounded perspectives for education research. A meta-ethnography translation between the two studies identifies and contrasts at least three thematic concerns for the respective women subjects—their identification as learners, as women, and as Muslim community members in India.

Knowledge and learning

41. Flueckiger's ethnography emphasises that for Amma, the basis and real importance of any learning, or pursuit of knowledge is relationships, and more fundamentally, love. Amma's learning rested on nurturing ongoing relationships with her Master, with Allah and with her messengers/*maukil,* who convey knowledge and assist in her healing. She applied (and built) her knowledge in the severing or balancing of inharmonious relationships amongst her clients. Amma and her husband resided in a university enclave, yet on the margins of the academic milieu and its social circulation and gate-keeping of authoritative knowledge. The milieu of Islamic vernacular healing in which Amma pursued and enacted her knowledge generated its own forms of authenticity and authoritative application and social circulation.

42. Khan's ethnography focuses on media messages and their active reception by young women of Jamia, Delhi as a mode of learning and knowledge construction. Khan emphasises how her research participants make sense of the confluence of two contrasting, sometimes conflicting streams of epistemological messages: mainstream mass-media narratives, especially television, where women's bodies are sites marking changing individual aspirations and where notions of nationalism seek to minimalise communal identity, and the messages of *apna mahol,* in their own environment of Jamia.

Gender

43. Gender is a pivotal analytical frame in both ethnographies. Amma makes the potent declaration that gender is the single and only real differential amongst human beings. She personally identifies with suffering socially constructed around womanhood. And expresses ambivalence about her own immersion in a role and pursuit of knowledge usually dominated by males by describing herself as having 'the body of a woman and heart of a man'.[42]

44. Cohen's ideas about embodiment in 'how we come to know' holds a crucial gender dimension particularly relevant to understanding the Jamia women's learning at the confluence of two streams: *apna mahol* and media messages. Khan cites feminist media scholars contrasting analyses of how increasing materialism in Indian society, following the opening up of the economy, is transforming the embodied meanings and definition of gender in Indian media and society. Notably, Radhika Parameswaran critiques the stress on 'feminine agency' in media narratives today, regarding it as predominantly supporting 'the ideological interests of India's consuming class'.[43] By contrast, Sunder Rajan suggests women's rejection of sartorial modesty and the donning of bold and westernised attire is a creative action and a sign of women's emerging modernity which challenges Indian patriarchal values.[44] Postcolonial feminist media scholars are unable to resolve whether sexualised representations of women are a sign of their empowerment or subjugation. But, the fact is that the new Indian woman has rejected many of the confining norms and conservative moulds that formerly constrained her options.

45. Khan's ethnographic data reveals that the forms of boldness ascribed to women in media narratives are far removed from the daily existence of Jamia's young women. However, the same young women did not criticise media representations that flaunted the norms of their community. Instead, they used several strategies to reconcile the differences: they denied or underestimated the difference that existed between their world and the world outside; they looked for celebrity role models who held more conservative values in order to bolster their lived stance; some curtailed their dreams rather than increase dissension between what they wanted and what was possible. Most importantly, most were perceptive enough to realise that it was their weak formal educational and economic capabilities which were the real barriers to the attainment of their dreams rather than their religious ideology. Lastly, the theme of materialism that weaves through all media narratives, including media's representation of the new Indian woman, was subtly influencing Khan's informants. Most of the young Muslim women of the Jamia area expressed wishes to find employment and have an independent income for pragmatic economic reasons rather than to restructure personal gender equations within their family or community.

Indian–Muslim identity

46. Both the ethnographies emphasise women's active ways of acting and making sense of a Muslim–non-Muslim divide. Flueckiger's ethnography explores this through face-to-face inter-religious interactions in the intimate confines of her small, yet open, healing room. Khan's through a study of more abstract encounters across the dividing road between a wealthy Hindu neighbourhood and poorer Muslim enclave—and across the metaphorical dividing road between media representations of mainstream aspirational lifestyle and the everyday expectations of Jamia community life. Each of the ethnographers grasps for a conceptual framework to explain their own protagonists' active roles in using their learning and knowledge to dissolve the rigidity of religious/ethnic boundaries, and to adjust religious identity with common wider identities. Khan developed her own reformulated frame of 'hybridity' to explain Jamia women's processes of constructing meaning and self-identity in the confluence of mass-media messages (that iterate India's bright future; that often stereotype Muslims; and that portray gender in targeted ways) and *apna mahol.* In their reception of media messages promising India's burgeoning economic future, many of the Jamia women foregrounded

their own aspirational participation in a common (neo-liberalised) global economic environment and national identity. Yet for Khan, this hybrid identity of her research participants was halting, experimental, liminal, 'patient' and hopeful. It was precariously contingent on the very uncertain employment prospects of the women and their lives yet to unfold upon graduation.

47. Flueckiger's conceptual frame is 'the crossroads', a geographical hub, landmark and public meeting place transcending religious and other social identities. She identified Amma's healing room as precisely this type of public hub grounded in an economy of shared idioms of healing: the balancing of relationships. Amma entirely deemphasised denominational differences and her tiny shopfront healing room was constantly inhabited by an interactive community of Muslims and non-Muslims who called upon her guidance and Islamic-based healing practices to confront common familial problems of relationships, economics and health.

48. Messengers and messages are implicit themes of the two ethnographies that foreground the mercurial communicative element of knowledge and learning. The idea that 'how we know' and 'how we come to know' involves different activating conditions, produces different outcomes, and generates different forms of knowledge,[45] becomes apparent through this meta-ethnography. Activating conditions included gendered embodiment, economic and social circumstances and media of learning. What is apparent is that in both the ethnographies, the women's learning and knowledge are not the learning of a static 'thing', they are ongoing processes of negotiation and relationships with others, with circumstances and with concepts that have a direct bearing on experiences of identity and relatedness.

Notes

All URLs in these references were operational when the paper was first published.

[1] As Abu-Lughod notes, 'Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged'. Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others,' *American Anthropologist* 104(3) (2002): 783–90, DOI: 10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.78.

[2] See Irfan Ahmad, 'Cracks in the "Mightiest Fortress": Jamaat-e-Islami's changing discourse on women,' *Modern Asian Studies* 5(2) (2008): 549–75.

[3] Ayesha Khurshid, 'Islamic traditions of modernity: Gender, class, and Islam in a transnational women's education project,' *Gender and Society* 29(1) (2015): 98–121.

[4] Khurshid, 'Islamic traditions of modernity,' p. 100.

[5] Francis Robinson, 'Varieties of South Asian Islam,' Research Paper No. 8. Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7A1, 1988: 1–19.

[6] See Mushirul Hasan, 'Negotiating with its past and present: The changing profile of the Aligarh Muslim University,' in *Knowledge, Power and Politics: Educational Institutions in India,* edited by Mushirul Hasan, 189–220, New Delhi: Roli Books, 1998.

[7] See Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

[8] Robinson, 'Varieties of South Asian Islam,' p. 4 describes how, for the Deoband founders Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, education was the answer to enable Muslims to be Muslims without political power. Their focus was a *madrasa* in Deoband, 90 miles northeast of Delhi, which grew to become one of the most important traditional universities after Al-Azhar in Cairo. It grew to a widespread madrasa movement which emphasised close adherence to *shari'ah.* At a time when the Muslims no longer controlled the Indian state, they promoted acquiring

knowledge for themselves and imposing it upon themselves. This was associated with propagation of Arabic literacy and the printing press. The Deobandi *madrasas* were dependent on public subscription and state assistance was always refused. The Deoband idea of independence was ultimately the rule of the *ulama* (learned men)

[9] Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffrey, 'Islamisation, gentrification and domestication: "A girls' Islamic course" and rural Muslims in Western Uttar Pradesh,' *Modern Asian Studies* 38(1) (2004): 1–53, DOI: 10.1017/S0026749X040010015.

[10] Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey, 'Islamisation, gentrification and domestication,' p. 28.

[11] Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

[12] Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey 'Islamisation, gentrification and domestication,' p. 28.

[13] Kumkum Sangari, *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narrative, Colonial English,* New Delhi: Tulika, 1999, cited in Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey, 'Islamisation, gentrification and domestication,' pp. 23 and 26.

[14] Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India,* New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002, cited in Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey, 'Islamisation, gentrification and domestication,' p. 26.

[15] Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey, Islamisation, gentrification and domestication,' p. 27.

[16] Seema Kazi, *Muslim Women in India,* London. Minority Rights Group International, 1999, pp. 25–26.

[17] George Noblit and Dwight Hare, *Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies. Qualitative Research Methods Volume 11,* Newbury Park: Sage Publications Ltd. 1988, p. 23.

[18] Dennis Beach, 'Personalisation and the education commodity: A meta-ethnographic analysis,' in *Meta-ethnographic Synthesis in Education: Challenges, Aims and Possibilities,* edited by Michalis Kakos and Bettina Fritzsche, special issue of *Ethnography and Education* 12(2) (2017): 148–164, DOI: 10.1080/17457823.2016.1247738.

[19] Isabell Uny, Emma France and George Noblit, 'Steady and delayed: Explaining the different development of meta-ethnography in health care and education,' in *Meta-ethnographic Synthesis in Education: Challenges, Aims and Possibilities,* edited by Michalis Kakos and Bettina Fritzsche, special issue of *Ethnography and Education* 12(2) (2017): 243–257, DOI: 10.1080/17457823.2017.1282320

[20] Christina Huf and Andrea Raggl, 'The normativity of the helping child—meta-ethnographic perspectives on individualised learning in age-mixed classrooms,' in *Meta-ethnographic Synthesis in Education: Challenges, Aims and Possibilities,* edited by Michalis Kakos and Bettina Fritzsche, special issue of *Ethnography and Education* 12(2) 2017: 165–77, DOI: 10.1080/17457823.2016.1192479.

[21] Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India,* Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006.

[22] Tabassum Khan, 'Emerging Muslim identity in India's globalised and mediated society: An ethnographic investigation of the halting modernities of the Muslim youth of Jamia enclave, New Delhi,' PhD thesis, Ohio University, 2009.

[23] Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 8

[24] Frederik Barth, 'An anthropology of knowledge,' *Current Anthropology* 43(1) (2002): 1–18, DOI: 10.1086/324131

[25] Barth, 'An anthropology of knowledge.'

[26] Emma Cohen, 'Anthropology of knowledge,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010): S193–S195, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9655.2010.01617.x.

[27] Cohen, 'Anthropology of knowledge,' p. S194.

[28] Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 8

[29] Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 140.

[30] Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life,* New York: Ballantine Books, 1988 cited in Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 141.

[31] Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 141.

[32] Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 157.

[33] Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 158.

[34] Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 235.

[35] Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 157.

[36] The Sachar Committee Report (2006) was commissioned in 2005 by then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The seven-member committee headed by retired Delhi High Court Chief Justice, Rajindar Sachar, was charged with systematically collecting information on Muslim's socio-economic status and public and private sector opportunities compared to other communities and analyse the above information to identify relevant issues and areas of intervention by the government.

[37] On 6 December 1992, 150, 000 volunteers of the Hindu Right political parties BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, Hindu nationalist political party) and VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad, translated as World Hindu Council, a right wing Hindu nationalist organisation) tore down the sixteenth-century Babri Masjid mosque in the city of Ayodhya at a site identified by some Hindus as the birthplace of the deity Rama. For at least four centuries the site had been used for religious purposes by both Hindus and Muslims. The demolition resulted in months of intercommunal violence leading to the deaths of over 2000 people.

[38] Khan, 'Emerging Muslim identity in India's globalised and mediated society,' pp. 42–43.

[39] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

[40] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by Bakhtin,* translated by Caryl Emerson, edited by Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986 [1975].

[41] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969; *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974.

[42] Flueckiger, *Amma's Healing Room,* p. 140.

[43] Radhika Parameswaran, 'Global queens, national celebrities: Tales of feminine triumph in post-liberalisation India,' *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21(4) (2004): 346–70.

[44] Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism,* London: Routledge, 1993, DOI 10.4324/9780203359662.

[45] Cohen, 'Anthropology of knowledge,' p. S194.

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