Claiming Their Space: Muslim Women-led Networks and the Women's Movement in India

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Abstract

The Shah Bano case of the 1980s was a landmark in the discourse on 'Muslim women's rights' in India. At this time, however, few Muslim women actually participated in the debates, which were dominated by male religious leaders and politicians or by 'secular' women's groups, which had scant Muslim representation. Since the 1980s several Muslim-women led organisations have emerged in urban areas across the country, some of which have formed networks to advocate for Muslim women's rights. This article looks at the emergence of two networks in particular, the Muslim Women's Rights Network (MWRN) and the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA), both of which were established during the last ten years. These networks have different but overlapping ideological bases, priorities and strategies. They both aim to challenge the authority of the Muslim religious leadership, represented by institutions such as the All India Muslim Personal Law Board. They also offer a critique of the mainstream women's movement, either from within the movement or from outside, as not having given sufficient space to the perspectives of women from marginalised communities. Both networks are engaged in struggles to reformulate power relations at the local and national levels, thus challenging the dominant conception of Muslim women as a passive, homogenous group with a common set of interests. Rather, the MWRN and the BMMA demonstrate new forms of political agency and are creating a space for a conceptualisation of identities that complicates the dichotomy between religious and gender-based interests and aims to reconcile the two in a manner that protects and promotes women's rights without denying the importance of religious identity.

Key Words: Muslim women, Indian women's movement, Muslim women's rights.

Introduction

The rights of Muslim women have increasingly been highlighted by the media, politicians, and various interest groups, both internationally and in individual countries, in the post-9/11 context. 'Muslim women', as a constructed category, have been used symbolically as pawns in the global war on terror (see Hirchkind and Mahmood 2002; Abu-Lughod 2002; Cooke 2008) as well as in national disputes between groups vying for political power. This is no less true in India, where the history of the discursive manipulation of the category 'Muslim women' stretches further back into the colonial period and through to the rise of Hindu right-wing parties in more recent times (Kirmani

2009). However, despite the symbolic import that 'Muslim women' have come to hold, until recently, it has been rare that the actual voices of Muslim women themselves are heard in debates about their own supposed oppression. However, the voices of Indian Muslim women, which are in no way uniform, are increasingly being raised individually and collectively, often alongside Muslim men and non-Muslim women, as part of organisations and networks in response to global and local challenges. These voices are reconstructing the category of 'Muslim women' on their own, often in competing and sometimes contradictory terms.

In India, what is known as 'the contemporary women's movement'[2] has been struggling for women's rights since the mid-70s and has organised around issues related to violence against women, employment, and political participation. In many cases the women's movement has come up against religious groups in their struggle to ensure gender equality, the most notable instance being during the Shah Bano case during the 1980s.[3] This case highlighted the difficulties of attempting to represent 'women' in a diverse and highly stratified society in which religious minorities were increasingly becoming the targets of political and physical assaults at the hands of the Hindu Right.[4] Furthermore, the Shah Bano case called into question the women's movement's own secular strategy as the nation became increasingly polarised along religious lines.

Although a handful of Muslim women emerged in support of the women's movement during the Shah Bano controversy (see Narain 2001; Hasan 1998), their numbers were relatively few, especially as compared to those that the Muslim conservative groups were able to rally, and what became apparent to many people both within and outside the movement at this time was its own domination by elite, upper-caste Hindu women. This is not to downplay the struggles of women from marginalised communities within the mainstream women's movement or as part of more localized

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[2] This refers to what is often termed the 'mainstream women's movement' and the 'contemporary women's movement' with the understanding that these are contentious terms representing what are fluid and loosely organised networks, which are constantly shifting (see Katzenstein 1989; Butalia 2002). This does not deny the presence of multiple women's movements across India that may not have termed themselves as such, but that have nevertheless been struggling to protect the rights of women as members of their communities (see note 5).

[3] In 1978, Shah Bano, a 72-year old Muslim woman, filed a case claiming maintenance from her ex-husband. She was granted a minor maintenance sum by the Madhya Pradesh High Court, which her husband disputed in the Supreme Court as a violation of Muslim Personal Law. The Supreme Court ruled that Shah Bano was in fact entitled to maintenance payments under the Criminal Procedure Code as well as under Muslim *shariat* law. The Court's decision came at a particularly sensitive moment in Indian politics as the Hindu Right-wing groups were increasingly gaining strength. Hence, the defensiveness around religious identities at this time was particularly high. For the Muslim leadership, personal law was held up as the last bastion of the integrity of 'the community's' identity, while for the Hindu Right, Muslim Personal Law represented the state's appeasement of minorities. The case culminated with the passage of the controversial Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill (1986), which established that Muslim women do not fall under the ambit of civil law in matters related to marriage (see Engineer 1987; Hasan 1998; Kishwar 1998).

[4] The 1980s witnessed an upsurge in support for Hindu nationalist groups represented at the political level by the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP). Support for Hindu nationalism increased during the *Ramjanmabhooni* campaign, which claimed that the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was built on the birthplace of the Hindu god, Ram. Hindu right-wing groups led a campaign beginning in the mid 1980s, which resulted in widespread violence between Hindus and Muslims throughout the country, and which eventually culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and subsequent riots in Bombay and in cities across North India (see Jaffrelot 1996; Hansen 1999).

movements for social change, nor is it arguing that the mainstream women's movement did not struggle for the rights of women from marginalised communities.[5] However, the lack of Muslim women's voices within the Shah Bano debates, as well as the critiques of the autonomous women's movement made by dalit women's groups during the 90s (see Dietrich 2003) highlighted the lack of representation and leadership of women from marginalised groups within the urban-based, mainstream women's movement.

The situation has been slowly shifting over the past two decades with women from marginalised communities beginning to organise both within the women's movement as well as independently into coalitions, networks and burgeoning movements. Subramaniam (2006, p. 50) discusses these changes:

The movement in the 1990s has experienced increasing tension. In the context of globalisation, linkages through transnational borders have provided opportunities for bringing issues of concern for women to the forefront. At the same time, local challenges have developed to counter the domination by urban-based, educated elite women of the movement…These developments have opened avenues for newer groups (organized along caste and religious lines) to assert themselves within the wider umbrella of the movement.

While the women's movement has always tried to address the problems of all women under the banner of 'sisterhood', it has been largely led by urban, upper-caste Hindu women. The emergence of new forms of organising by women of marginalised communities at the national level over the past two decades opens up the space for a more complex understanding of multiple systems of power based on class, caste, religion and gender, which enriches the women's movement as a whole as well as the political sphere in general.

Muslim women-led groups and networks began appearing during the late 1980s and 1990s in urban centres across the country, and although they may continue to be relatively few in number, their voices are increasingly gaining national attention through their vocal participation in debates related to Muslim women's rights. Recent prominent cases involving Muslim women that have been highlighted by the media, including that of Gudiya in 2004 and Imrana in 2005,[6] demonstrated the growth in organising amongst

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[5] In fact, many of the cases that became rallying points for the women's movement were those of women from the most marginalized sections of society. For example, two cases of custodial rape during the 1980s, that of a poor Muslim woman, Rameeza Bee, and a tribal girl in the Mathura rape case, raised a national outcry by the women's movement (see Butalia 2002). The women's movement has also taken up issues of socio-economic justice such as women's employment and women's land rights since its inception (see Kumar 1993). Furthermore, women from marginalized communities have long been active participants in more localized movements for social change, whether these were identified as 'women's movements' or not. For example, women were some of the most active members of the Shahada movement, which was a movement led by tribal Bhil landless labourers in Maharashtra during the 1960s as well as being at the forefront of the Chipko movement, which emerged in the Himalayan foothills during the 1970s (*ibid.*).
[6] The case of Gudiya sprang to national attention in September 2004. Gudiya was young woman whose first husband, while serving in the Indian army, had been missing for several years. She subsequently remarried and was expecting a child with her second husband when her first husband returned. Despite her wishes, the local religious clerics in her village ordered her to return to her first husband, which was later backed up by more prominent religious clerics at the national level. In the end, Gudiya returned to her first husband and tragically died two years later as a result of complications related to childbirth. In Imrana's case, which occurred in June 2005, a woman was allegedly raped by her father-in-law. Upon hearing about this, local religious clerics deemed her marriage to her husband to be invalid as she was now technically 'married' to her father-in-law. Imrana's father-in-law was finally arrested and sentenced to ten years in

Muslim women since the time of Shah Bano, with several Muslim women-led groups vocal in their opposition to the diktats of the conservative *ulema* [Muslim clergy]. These groups both challenge the dominant construction of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' by presenting themselves as articulate and powerful agents, as well as continuing to draw attention to the multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion that Muslim women in India face. They rally around the issue of personal law, presenting a counter-voice to the orthodox position taken by the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB),[7] as well as highlighting wider issues faced by Muslim women that have not been addressed by the male-dominated *ulema*, the state, or in any depth by the women's movement including religious and gender-based insecurity resulting from communal violence as well as social, economic and political marginalisation and discrimination.

Although the Shah Bano case sparked a slew of interest on the issue of 'Muslim women's rights', little has been written since this time about the developments within and outside of the women's movement on this issue. Building on the work of Vatuk (2008), who explores the emergence of a nascent 'Islamic feminist movement' in India, this paper looks at the formation of two networks in particular, the Muslim Women's Rights Network (MWRN) during the late 90s and the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan[8] (BMMA) in 2005. These groups employ what Spivak has termed 'strategic essentialism' (1989; 1990; 1993) by using the unifying category 'Muslim women' in order to organise politically for greater rights. The MWRN and the BMMA are hence engaged in both undoing 'Muslim women' as a category that represents passive victim-hood, and re-creating this identity in a positive manner as a means of claiming power and space within the political sphere. Based on semi-structured interviews with members of these networks conducted between September and December 2008 alongside others who advocate for Muslim women's rights, this article explores these networks' ideologies, strategies, activities, and relationships with both the *ulema* as well as with the wider women's movement.

Muslim Women's Networks and their Engagement with Islam

The passage of the Muslim Women's Protection Act (1986) after the Shah Bano controversy, which reaffirmed the authority of Muslim Personal Laws[9] in cases involving maintenance after divorce, was viewed as a defeat by members of the women's movement, who felt that they had been unable to overcome the influence of the orthodox Muslim leadership on the state. However, as Giugni (1998) points out, social movements can often have multiple effects, many of which may not be immediately apparent. A

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prison following an outcry by women's NGOs and the media against the ruling of the local clerics. The facts of both cases are highly contested, but both led to a stand off between women's groups and religious clerics, which was immediately picked up and magnified by the national media (see Naqvi 2006).

[7] The All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPB) was created in 1973 in India with the primary aim of protecting Muslim personal laws from government interference. Since this time, the AIMPLB has publically commented on a number of issues related to the status of Muslims in India, including prominent cases involving women's rights as well as issues such as the Babri Masjid demolition. It is a mostly-male body composed of a mixture of *ulema* as well as lay people from various parts of the country representing different Islamic schools of thought.

[8] In Hindi, this means 'Indian Muslim Women's Movement.'

[9] India has a separate set of personal laws for each religious group, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Parsis. These laws deal with issues related to the family including marriage and inheritance.

diffuse, yet significant, impact that a movement can have is to increase the level of democratisation of a society (*ibid*: xii). The heightened interest in the issue of Muslim women's rights as well as the appearance of groups during the late 1980s and 1990s that were led by and worked with Muslim women can be seen as an important ripple effect of the campaigning that took place around the Shah Bano case. Groups such as Awaaz-e-Niswan (AeN), which spearheaded the formation of the MWRN, as well as the Women's Research Action Group (WRAG), which was part of the MWRN but is now aligned with the BMMA, were both founded between the late 1980s and early 1990s in Mumbai and were at least partially influenced during their foundational phases by the debates around Muslim Personal Laws that had been taking place since the mid-80s.[10]

The Muslim Women's Rights Network is a loose network of women's organisations spread across the country, some but not all of which are led by Muslim women. Their first meeting was held in 1999 in Mumbai, and they have subsequently met on an annual basis in different cities around the country (Vatuk 2008). The MWRN focuses on issues related to Muslim personal laws including advocating for a ban on the practice of triple *talaq*[11] as well as securing women's matrimonial rights. They also work on creating understanding between women across religious boundaries, and they actively encourage the participation of non-Muslim women in their campaigns.

Although they work on securing rights for Muslim women, they do so from a 'human rights perspective' rather than a religious-based perspective—a point which has been the cause of on-going discussion and debate within the network. Saba, a member of the MWRN in Mumbai, says that they are not confined to working within a religious context: 'If we get rights within religion then fine, and if not then we look at gender justice and we look towards human rights to inform whatever our interventions will be' (23 September 2008). In this way, although they are not opposed to religion and recognize the rights of individuals to practice their faith, they are clear that their main priority is protecting women's rights at all costs. This was one of the main points of divergence between the MWRN and those that went on to form the BMMA.

The Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan was formed more recently in 2005, and is also composed of organisations working with Muslim women across the country, many of which had previously been part of the MWRN. The BMMA also includes a large number of individual members, 10,000 at the time in which fieldwork was being conducted, spread mainly across the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. Although the BMMA advocates around the issue of matrimonial rights, their main objectives are broader and focus on improving the socio-economic status of the Muslim community as a whole and promoting the role of Muslim women within the community to act as leaders. They also highlight issues related to caste within the Muslim

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[10] It is important to point out that, like the women's movement as a whole, both the MWRN and the BMMA include a multitude of opinions, which are constantly evolving in response to internal debates and shifting contexts. Therefore, it is misleading to present either as having a unified stand.

[11] This is the practice of pronouncing '*talaq*' (divorce) three times in one sitting, which according to the Muslim Personal Laws as they stand, is a valid form of divorce. However, there is widespread disagreement amongst Islamic scholars as to whether this is permissible in Islam. Women's groups have long been campaigning for an end to this practice, arguing that it violates women's rights and goes against the spirit of the Quran. The Bombay High Court also ruled in 2001 that a divorce was not legal unless it had been preceded by a process of arbitration and attempts at reconciliation (see 'Triple *Talaq* Not Good Enough…' 21 January 2007).

community, recognising the inequalities not only between Muslims and the wider society but within the Muslim community itself. Their pamphlet states that the values of 'democracy, secularism, equality, non-violence, human rights, and justice will be their guiding principles,' which is similar to the approach taken by the MWRN. However, it adds that they believe in 'positive, liberal, humanist, and feminist interpretations of religion for ensuring justice and equality.' In this way, the BMMA is attempting to combine the values of secularism with progressive interpretations of Islamic texts.

Unlike the MWRN, which is tolerant but not celebratory of religion, the BMMA actively engages with Islamic texts as part of their strategy with the conviction that such an approach will lead to justice for women. Noorjehan Safianiaz, a founding member of the BMMA who works with WRAG, talks about the importance of addressing religious identity in the current political climate:

Given the context of the issue of identity crisis that the community is going through, and given the status of Muslim women in the community…if you go and tell this Muslim woman who is a minority within a minority…'look, damn with your religion, I want you to come out on the streets and protest and demand your rights, but please keep your religion within your house'….That was what was the point of departure with the mainstream women's movement….I'm a Muslim, and I am not apologetic about that, and I do not want to deny my identity. (22 September 2008)

Members of the BMMA argue that as religion is intrinsic to the identities of the majority of Muslim women, it therefore must inform their vision and strategies. By advocating for a progressive understanding of Islam, they aim to work within a framework that is acceptable at the community-level in a context in which religious identity has become increasingly important. They do this by working with Indian advocates of 'Islamic feminism' such Asghar Ali Engineer (see Engineer 1995) and Zeenat Shaukat Ali (see Ali 1996), both of whom have written extensively about women's rights in Islam and the need to reform Muslim Personal Laws in order to reflect the principles of justice and equality enshrined in the Qur'an.

This follows an international trend amongst advocates of women's rights in Muslim communities, which began in the early twentieth century in the Middle East but has accelerated and spread since the early 1990s (see Mojab 2001). Attempts to interpret Islamic texts from a feminist position have been undertaken in various parts of the world with scholars such as Mernissi (1991), Ahmed (1992), Hassan (1996) and Wadud (2006) pointing to the supposed corruption of Islam over the centuries by patriarchal cultures. In Malaysia, the group Sisters in Islam promotes feminist interpretations of Islamic texts as a means of arguing for women's rights (see Othman 2006).[12] These Islamic feminist approaches have sparked a great deal of debate and criticism within feminist circles for being limited in their ability to challenge power structures (Mojab 2001; Moghissi 1999), for reifying Islam and falsely divorcing it from its historical, political and cultural context (Kandiyoti 1991; Phillips 2009), and for inadvertently legitimizing Islamist discourses by projecting Islam as the only valid source of authority and thus closing the space for secular feminist arguments (Zia 2009; Balchin 2003). These debates also continuously

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[12] Furthermore, the Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML) network has long been facilitating debates and discussions amongst feminists working in Muslim communities, including both those feminists who take religious approaches as well as those that take secular approaches, without advocating for any singular approach themselves.

take place within and amongst the MWRN and the BMMA, with the MWRN leaning towards secular approaches and the BMMA opting for an 'Islamic feminist' approach.

Despite these differences in approach, both groups have also attempted to positively engage with Islamic laws in a practical manner through their advocacy of the concept of the *nikahnama*, or Muslim marriage contract, which they see as a possible means of providing security for women within the framework of Islamic marriages. This campaign, which attempts to insert protections for women within the marriage contract, was begun by advocates of Muslim women's rights during the early 1990s and was later picked up the MWRN and the BMMA. Both networks have drafted their own 'model *nikahnama*', which aims to ensure that women have financial security as well as protection from arbitrary divorce and the right to initiate divorce proceedings themselves. Although this campaign has had a limited impact in terms of numbers of actual marriages performed, partially because of the reluctance on the part of local religious clerics, it has been an effective means of raising awareness about the issue of matrimonial rights within communities.

Both networks are also in agreement in their criticism of the AIMPLB and question their right to represent 'the community.' The MWRN attempted to engage with the AIMPLB throughout the 1990s through letters detailing the cases of the women with whom they were working to which they received no response. However, many of its members, along with others engaged with the issue of Muslim women's rights, were finally invited to a meeting with the AIMPLB in 2001, which was held at Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi. Although the meeting raised many of the activists' expectations that the Board could change, according to those who attended, it was largely a disappointment. Naseem describes the interaction that occurred during this meeting:

There were a lot of groups working with Muslim women and they presented their problems to them. Several women took the microphone and said with anger that 'this is what happened to us,'… but they [the AIMPLB] didn't react, and they were also getting angry that these women are not observing *parda* [female seclusion]. (20 September 2008)

For many of the activists that were in attendance, the lack of receptivity of the Board members was disappointing and a sign of their superior attitude towards women's groups. Many had hoped that the AIMPLB would commit to reforming personal laws, banning triple *talaq* and releasing their own model *nikahnama*, because although they have no statutory powers, the AIMPLB is recognised as wielding a great deal of informal influence over Muslim communities because of their reputation as being religious authorities. However, what became clear to many who attended was that the AIMPLB is not interested in making any changes to what they see as divinely ordained practices, and nor do they have the legal power to do so because, as they themselves pointed out at the meeting, they, like the women's groups, are 'just an NGO'. It was after this meeting that many women's activists recognised that engaging with the AIMPLB was a 'futile effort' and a 'bankrupt strategy' both because of their lack of power as well as their ideological position.[13]

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[13] The AIMPLB eventually released its own copy of the model *nikahnama* in 2005, which was most probably the result both of the initiative of its own members as well as external pressure from women's groups. However, this was met with scorn by most women's groups because they felt it did not outline sufficient protections for women and particularly, it does not include a provision for women to have the right to divorce their husbands and neither does it discourage the practice of polygamy. It also states that

Noorjehan Safianiaz blames the state for granting the AIMPLB symbolic authority. When asked why the AIMPLB receives so much attention when it is not a statutory body, she says:

It's the state [that is responsible]. If there's anything to do with Muslims, they call the Board because they don't have an alternative, so that's why our idea is that we should become as strong as the board. Next time if the state wants to take any decision, they cannot do it without Muslim women…but for that we really have to work hard and strengthen ourselves. (Noorjehan Safianiaz, 22 September 2008)

Hence, the BMMA hopes to become an alternative voice representing the Muslim community both within public discourse as well as vis-à-vis the state. Alongside the BMMA's aspirations to challenge and eventually supersede the AIMPLB's influence, the appearance of several newer personal law boards in recent years represents a direct threat to the AIMPLB's previously unchallenged authority to govern on issues related to *sharia*. Both the Bareilvi school of thought and the Shia sect formed their own respective law boards in 2005 ('Shia Sect Forms Personal Law Board' 2005). Furthermore, an All India Muslim Women's Personal Law Board was formed in the same year in Lucknow (Vatuk 2008). Although none of these groups has acquired the same level of authority as the AIMPLB, the very appearance of alternative law boards presents a strong challenge to the AIMPLB's power and dominance and calls attention to the diversity of viewpoints within the Muslim community.

Both Part of and Apart from the Women's Movement

While the dominant strand within the mainstream women's movement has espoused secularism and has even been explicitly anti-religious at times, due largely to atmosphere of cultural radicalism in which it was born (Omvedt 1993), during the 80s certain actors within the women's movement began to co-opt and reinterpret Hindu religious symbols in an attempt to gain support amongst a larger group of women. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1998, p. WS36) points to the strategic use of religious symbolism by certain actors within the women's movement who 'invoked 'traditional' (read: Hindu) symbols in some cases as a means of diluting, if not countering, the western bias of 'feminism'.' Hence the first feminist publishing house in India was named 'Kali for Women', after the Hindu goddess. Similarly, the women's journal *Manushi*, edited by Madhu Kishwar, who has been one of the staunchest critics of 'western'-style secular feminism, published articles related to women's spirituality and feminine religious symbolism in a bid to explore indigenous 'cultural traditions' for sources of female strength. These developments, although limited in extent and highly contested within the women's movement (see Rajan 1998; Agnes 1995), may have contributed to the exclusion of non-Hindu women from the mainstream women's movement.

Despite the shift away from using Hindu symbolism outright and the growing awareness of differences in power between women since the 1990s, critics argue that the mainstream women's movement has continued to be coloured in its approach and agenda by upper caste Hinduism. Questions related to representation within the Indian women's movement reflect the shifts that have been occurring within women's movements in

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wives should obey their husbands, stipulating that, they should ask their husbands' permission before leaving the house (AIDWA Memorandum 2005).

various parts of the world since the 1980s. In the US context, for example, women of colour have questioned the hegemony of white, middle class women within the women's movement (hooks 1982), and have argued for an approach that took into account multiple forms of oppression, combining gender, race and class, and pointing to the intersectionality of identities (Andersen 2005) and different 'matrices of domination'(Collins 1990). In the UK as well, black and Asian women questioned the hegemony of white feminist movements, which did not address the imbalances of power between different groups of women (Amos and Parmar 1984). Similar processes of reflection also took place within women's movements in Africa and Latin America during this period, as women marginalised by multiple social factors highlighted the complexity of oppression (see de la Rey 1997; Sternbach *et. al.*1992).

The Indian women's movement has been criticised by women belonging not only to the Muslim community, but also by dalit and Christian woman. Flavia Agnes speaks about her own alienation from the women's movement because of her Christian identity. She says that although she never thought of herself as a 'Christian feminist', she was treated as such by other members of the women's movement:

Somewhere in the 1990s, many of us began to think that some are more equal than others. Some realities become more real. Some issues become more important. I personally feel that equality is being articulated in the context of urban, middle class, upper caste, Hindu women. They may take up many issues but it is from their perspective. (Flavia Agnes, 20 December 2008)

Agnes argues that the women's movement takes upper caste Hinduism as the norm and treats women from minority communities as representatives of their respective groups. Dalit women have also expressed this sense of alienation from the mainstream women's movement, who they argue has not sufficiently addressed the issue of caste-based oppression (Dietrich 2003).

Many of the members of the MWRN and the BMMA echo the sense of alienation and disillusionment with the mainstream women's movement, although their respective responses are different. While members of both networks trace the origins of their feminist consciousness to the mainstream women's movement, the MWRN continues to see itself as part of the wider women's movement. Hasina Khan argues that their positioning within the women's movement is important both ideologically and strategically:

Muslim women do need to make a space for themselves, but this does not mean that Muslim women make their own space and also carry out their struggle alone. If we say this, then we might become divided. Then we will say that Hindu women also should fight for their own rights and create their own space. Then we will not be able to call ourselves 'a women's movement.' There will be a Muslim women's movement, a Hindu women's movement, a Christian women's movement. (26 September 2008)

Hasina expresses her commitment to a secular approach that transcends religious boundaries. She argues that Muslim women will only be successful in their struggle if they have the support of women of other religious communities. At the same time, she acknowledges the need for Muslim women to create a space in which they can articulate

their particular problems, but she does not see this as an exclusive space. Rather, she is hopeful that solidarity of purpose can exist despite religious divisions.[14]

Similarly, Naila[15] says that the women's movement has made a space for Muslim women, but she is also aware of its limitations:

If you look at it from the perspective of the [women's] movement…Muslim women's questions have undoubtedly been given a place. The pillars of the movement have been of equality from women's perspectives no matter what religion they belong to…but at some point we will have to consider the fact that, before speaking about a particular group you have to make sure that that community is also with you….If questions are being raised about the Muslim community, then it is very important that the Muslim community is also with you. (26 December 2008)

Although Naila has a positive overall impression of the women's movement and its commitment to women of all communities, she also addresses its limitations. She points to the inability of the women's movement to gain acceptance amongst women and men at the community level, but she is of the opinion that the movement can be changed from within by engaging with social issues at the grassroots.

On the other hand, the BMMA is more forthright in arguing that the women's movement has failed to address the needs of women from marginalised communities because of its historical domination by upper caste Hindu women, and that there is a need to create a separate movement is led by and dominated by Muslim women. Zakia Jowher, who works with Action Aid and is a founding member of the BMMA, says that this sense of alienation from the mainstream women's movement is shared across various marginalised groups:

In our vision mission document it is very clear that we will always build our struggle along with other excluded people, which includes all of the dalits and adivasis, all other women, and the workers, labourers, all other excluded people….We are very clear that whoever's fight it is, they are the ones who should lead. We don't need a Brahmin woman to come and lead us….If for 60 years we haven't received justice, it is because the males have led, and within the women's movement its always the women from the creamy layer who lead it….Why is it that after all of these years of the women's movement, your hair has gone white, and you walk with a cane, but still it is only you who gets up on the stage and speaks? What about all of those hundreds and thousands of women that you would have ostensibly empowered? Why don't you let them come and speak? Why don't you let them take the leadership? (15 December 2008)

Like Hasina Khan, Zakia argues that there should be solidarity across religious and caste boundaries. However, she is explicit that these alliances should be built between those who have been excluded from the structures of power rather than based on any notions of common 'sisterhood'. Zakia asserts that it is both the male Muslim leadership as well as the largely upper caste Hindu leadership of the women's movement that has hindered Muslim women and those from other marginalised groups to emerge as

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[14] However, at times members of the MRWN also feel that 'mainstream' women's organisations do not take the needs of Muslim women seriously. I attended the MWRN's 2008 meeting held in Kolkata. Despite the fact that invitations were sent to all of the major women's organisations in the state, there was hardly any representation from local women's organisations. Members of the MWRN expressed their deep disappointment with this lack of support and wrote an open letter to the women's groups nationally, which referred to a shared sense of 'ghettoisation within the movement.'
[15] Name changed to protect the anonymity of the respondent.

leaders. It is for these reasons that she and others have felt the need to explicitly state that the BMMA should be composed largely of and be led by Muslim women.

Conclusions: Forging a Third Space

The MWRN and the BMMA operate in a context in which the discursive space to discuss Muslim women's rights is in some senses expanding, with an increasing awareness of religious-based discrimination brought about by such developments as the Sachar Committee Report of 2005.[16] At the same time, however, advocates of Muslim women's rights continue to navigate in a political terrain that is restricted by a sense of insecurity and defensiveness *because* of the status of Muslims as a 'threatened minority' both as a reaction to repeated violence against religious minorities as well as the growing targeting of Muslims under the auspices of India's 'War on Terror' (see Navlakha 2009). In this context, any discussion of women's rights continues to be viewed as an attack on the community and a de facto vote for the politics of the Hindu Right. In spite of these limitations, the MWRN and the BMMA represent an important challenge to both the male-dominated *ulema* as well as to the mainstream women's movement through their innovative engagements with religious discourses and their questioning of the boundaries between religious and gender-based identities.

Although no legal reforms have taken place with regards to Muslim women's rights since the Shah Bano affair, the presence alone of Muslim women-led networks marks a significant shift in the discursive landscape. The creation of these networks is especially remarkable given the recent increase in insecurity amongst Muslims due to the 2002 Gujarat pogrom[17] and the series of terrorist attacks in cities across India between 2006 and 2008 including those that took place in Jaipur in May 2008 and the attacks that took place across Mumbai in November 2008, which have led to the targeting of Muslim men by the state authorities. Such an atmosphere could easily lead to silence on the issue of Muslim women's rights, as has been the case in the past. However, Muslim-women led networks are no longer allowing this to happen. As a young member of the MWRN , Aqeela, says:

When riots happen, Muslim women's rights fall further behind, so our effort is that…Muslim women's rights aren't left behind. You can't say that there is an atmosphere or communalism or terrorism right now, so you cannot talk about Muslim women's rights. That is what we have always said in our campaigning no matter what the political atmosphere has been. (Aqeela, 20 September 2008)

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[16] The Sachar Committee Report, which was published in 2006 by the Government of India, found that Muslims as a whole lagged far behind other religious groups in terms of education, employment, and representation in government. The report sparked a national debate on the issue of religious-based discrimination, with some arguing that Muslims, like other marginalized groups, should also be part of the system of reservations and that the government should invest in the socio-economic development of the Muslim community in order to correct years of deprivation and discrimination.

[17] In February 2002, fire was set to the Sabarmati Express in the Gujarati city of Godhra, which was carrying Hindu *karsevaks* (volunteers) from the site of the demolished Babri Masjid, killing the 59 passengers trapped inside the bogey. Although it is still unclear who set the fire, at the time the BJP-led government and media in Gujarat were quick to point to the finger at Muslim militants, thus unleashing a pogrom against Muslims across Gujarat, which claimed over 2000 lives and destroyed the homes and livelihoods of countless others. Though the violence at this time was isolated to the state of Gujarat, Muslims across the country became increasingly frightened for their own safety as reports of horrific violence filtered through the national media.

Aqeela voices a new sense of determination and defiance that is growing amongst women of marginalized communities across India who are claiming their multiple identities and their right to self-representation.

The efforts of activists such as those involved in the MWRN and the BMMA are beginning to create a 'third space' (see Khan 1998) in which Muslim women are engaged in redefining their identities and reformulating relations of power, thus challenging the long-held notion that religious identity and women's rights are diametrically opposed as well as the notion that Muslim women lack political will or agency. These activists challenge such assumptions through their own political assertion and ideological diversity while at the same time refashioning the category 'Muslim women' as a means of organizing women to raise their voices and claim their rights while positively claiming their multiple identities.

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