

A Multi-layered Village in Malda : Sociological Accounts from the Field

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Abstract

The paper dwells on the idiosyncratic characters of a Minority dominant village in Malda which intrigues the researcher. The researcher plots the village on a larger context and problematizes its characters which were taken for granted. The paper traces the everyday life of the village Goalnagra and follows the routine lives of Muslim girls to find out how they become extra-ordinary in no time. The paper challenges the stereotyped curses incurred on a girl as she walks out of a marriage and investigates how she changes not just her own life but even those of the others.

Keywords: minority, Malda, Goalnagra, Muslim girls

Introduction

Malda is the southernmost district of North Bengal which contains fifteen community development blocks and these blocks contain total of 1771 villages of the district. Malda is mostly a rural district containing only twenty nine urban units of two are Municipalities or Statutory Towns and rest of them are Census Towns. A census town is one which is not statutorily notified or administered as a town, however, whose population had been able to attain some urban properties. These properties are not many but significant ones amongst them may be noted. Population in a census town does not exceed 5,000. At least 75 percent of the male working population is employed outside the agricultural sector and the minimum population density is 400 persons per 1000 square mile or km. The district having as many as 1771 villages and only a handful of census towns underline its rural thrust. Though it is true that the urban share of its population has expanded from 7.3 percentage as enumerated in the 2001 census to around 13.6 percent in its 2011 census, the rate of increase is quite nominal, given its bumper rural population (Census Report:2011).

With faulty family planning strategies in place and sometimes with such policies not working at all, it is not surprising to note that the district has already experienced the second highest decadal population growth rate in the state with a figure of 21.2 percent and much higher than the state average. The density of population of this district is 1,069 which makes it rank 9th in the state. The story of a disadvantaged population goes further till we find that Malda occupies 11th position in terms of its population in the state and this indicates its constraints and unabated pressure on its current resources. Being primarily a rural district, with such a humongous population, sustenance becomes undoubtedly difficult.

The sex-ratio of the district is equally perturbing and we find it at 944 which is even lower than the state's sex ratio hovering at around 950 in the 2011 Census. Hence it is not surprising to note that the district ranks 11th in the state when only its rural sex ratio is taken into consideration. Again segregating the sex ratio into separate groups, the picture is more alarming. For the scheduled caste population,

the sex ratio is 931 and it stands 16th in the state whereas for the Scheduled Tribe population, it is 993 and ranks 8th in the state. The over-all sex ratio had taken a topsy-turvy ride as far as this district is concerned. It has been observed that the total sex ratio of the district sliced down from 1951 to 2011 except in 1981 and 2001 census. In the similar note, the rural sex ratio had also followed a decreasing trend up to 1991 and then increased up to 2011 census. Once again, the sex ratio fell down from 2001 to 2011 and we found the sex ratio skidded down to 944 as against 948 in 2001 census.

Thus, we find Malda is a seamless space with layers opening one after the other. The district is sharply screwed especially when the gender question arises. It becomes even sharper when it is intertwined with more gruelling factors like caste, community and religion. However, Malda's impeding factors refuse to die down but only spiral as we move further. Malda has a mixed population comprising of a large section of the depressed castes and tribes as well as other backward communities, making Malda a truly coloured district. It occupies 12th position in the state in terms of its Scheduled Caste population. It does not stop at that, its Scheduled Tribe population is even more telling and the district stands at 12th position when considering its ST population. Malda therefore represents a very wide range of social problems which may be problematized in ways not enquired before. Almost all of its fifteen blocks has its own share of hazards which are in some ways or other related to its socio-cultural and geo-political setting which is quite different from others in each distinct ways.

Therefore, the question comes how to choose which block to study upon and more important to understand which village to zero in, in order to get a clearer picture on the issues that we are trying to problematize. The question becomes more entangled since there are so many challenges that the district faces, and the gender question remains unsettled as before. However, we must remember that the setting must be chosen, keeping in mind the problem that we are trying to investigate. Our present problem, which is to look at the status of education among the young girls of Goalnagra village in Gazole block of Malda becomes more pronounced against this background which seeps with teething problems that the district in particular faces. Problematizing our issue becomes more difficult in the mire of such entangled factors where interstices of this village society seemed continuous and engaging.

Getting a garish imagery of Gazole

From a district with such a diverse composition, the blocks have their own distinct characteristics which makes it difficult to streamline. However, Gazole block is the largest block in the district both in terms of the area it covers and the population that it sustains and this makes our task even more arduous. Despite that we chose to concentrate on this block because we believed its sheer size of population and the variety of villages will help us pin down those at the flag end of development. The geopolitical mapping of the block makes it even more interesting. Let us have a brief idea of this geopolitical space into which Gazole block is entrenched. The block is surrounded by Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpore on the north, Old Malda on the south, Ratua block on the west and Bamongola on the east. Gazole block is around twenty seven kilometres from the Malda district headquarters. The block has a total area of 513.65 sq. kms of land and a total population of around 34,3830 people. According to the 2011 census records, the total number of villages stand at 286 and it has two census towns, viz. Rangabhaita and Bandhail. The block is surrounded by the districts of Uttar Dinajore and Dakshin Dinajpore, two most backward districts in Bengal. The district of Dinajpore stood 13th in the Human Development Index of West Bengal and was considered one of the most backward district of the state. I felt the district boundaries are not perennial and there must be some sort of osmosis between the districts. I have a vibe that the in and out-migration will always flow making Gazole a vibrant and a dynamic block to study indeed. On the east however is the Bamongola and on the west is Ratua block. The south, moreover is embossed by the blocks of Habibpur and Old Malda which are far more developed than the rest. So it's quite natural that the impact on Gazole had been multiple and multifarious.

Gazole has a very high percentage of scheduled population of which around 40 percentage of its population is constituted of the scheduled caste and 20 percent of its population is scheduled tribe. Gazole has quite a high literacy rate of 63.07 percent of which around 62 percent of its rural population is literate. It is quite surprising that of this rural literacy, around 70 percent of men are literate whereas it only stands at 55 percent when it comes to female literacy. The male-female literacy gap stands at around 14 percent which is quite disturbing. This is more so striking where a whopping number of people, standing at around 1, 92, 509 people of the block is literate which means around 55 percent of its populace is literate (Census Report: 2011). A block like this with so many intriguing factors, it really needs to be pinned down and investigated to the hilt. Let us now move inside the Gazole block and look at its villages and choose one among the rest.

The Goalnagra village: Questioning its vivacious vitalities

Moving to the core of the Gazole block, the contours of its villages become clearer. Gazole has a total of 291 villages, of which around 5 villages are uninhabited (Census Report: 2011). From all these villages, it was quite difficult for me to zero in on a single village, because there were many considerations to make. I wanted my village to be at the centre of the block such that it could absorb all the different vibes coming from the multiple sides. Definitely, not on the main road, I wanted my village in some narrow alley, though of course not remotely located because that will make my chances of accommodation bleak and bland. I wanted to stay in the village I intend to study for that should enable me to have a constant and close watch on the site I am working upon. Remote villages hardly offer any rentals where I can stay and initiate my work, though it happened to be so that while studying another village in Gazole, I managed to stay there for a couple of days but felt long term stay may turn somewhat discommoding for the family I was staying with. The family, however was very warm and their bonhomie struck me for they were willing to oblige me in any which way possible but somehow I felt stuck and wanted badly a place of my own from where possibly, I can work more freely and at ease. I wanted a village not too far from a main road, so that possibly I can find an accommodation for myself. Unlike remote villages, where finding a rented house may be difficult, fringe villages offer you such facilities aplenty from where possibly I can work.

I chose Malda for the odd reason that my maternal aunt lived here and I thought she might help me in my maiden venture, but it came out like this that I have had made several trips to Malda but I was so engrossed in my field trips, that never had I had the chance to visit her even for once. One reason might be so that she seemed perfectly at ease with her urban life and did not show any interest in the vast rural life that her own place had cherished. I felt she was absolutely ripped off from her roots and her associations would not help me much. So this time I was looking for a village not too far from the road so that I can take a lodging to settle down on my own for quite some times. In the meantime, the devastating Lock down had already started and the subsequent lockdown had meant my journey would turn out to be more difficult than I might have thought of. Finding a house to stay was difficult and when I felt hopeless and retired at the onset of the first wave, I thought I would never come back to the place I wanted to study so closely. But it happened to be so that as I sat down in my home doomed and despaired, I met a man who surprisingly worked in a college in Gazole. I found him through an acquaintance and was more than eager to help me. He proposed the name of his village, Goalnagra and suggested that it would be a very good idea to work in his native village. For if I wanted, he would help me with all the resources he had and his resourcefulness flabbergasted me. I was wondering there are hundreds of such villages waiting to be studied but with very few takers to embark on such a journey. I decided to start my village study with this hamlet not because Nafar (name changed), as his name turned out to be, could bail me out from the difficult situations that I would soon be placed into but also because I suddenly imagined him as a Messiah swooping me out when there was trouble brewing in this unknown land.

Nafar, a young stout man in his thirties, happens to be a contractual teacher in a college which is

rather the only degree college in Gazole, better known as Gajole Mahavidyalaya. He is a native of the Goalnagra village and had been living in this village since his birth. The village is his ancestral village where his parents had been living for quite a long time now. It is this ancestral village of which Nafar boasts quite often and he insisted that I should study this village for its sheer diversity and idiosyncrasy. Nafar is the first boy ever to get a graduation degree in the village and his sister Naureen is the first girl in his community to earn a post-graduation degree for herself. Hailing from a minority community and being the first generation learner, one of the kind which dominates the village, Noor considers himself lucky for having rafted this far in rough winds in which few can muster courage to keep their sails firm and grounded without getting adrift haywire. On Nafar's insistence, I decided to give this village a chance though I was not sure whether to finally go with this village. Surprisingly, as I entered the village, a whole lot of things spilled open and I was gravitated towards it as if by an unknown force prodding me through out. Now, let us come to my interest in studying the village and the extraneous factors that propelled me further.

The idiosyncratic village

I was more interested in understanding the impact of the policies meant for empowering the young girls in Gazole block especially in the villages that I was studying. It was true that on Nafar's insistence, I chose this village but there were other factors which propelled me towards this village. The village was situated almost at the heart of the village. Its central position attracted me. The village was not very far from the Malda town station, it was around 34 kilometres from the railway junction and around 27 kilometres from Malda district headquarters. Taking the National Highway NH 34, one could reach there within an hour and a half.

Malda has two sub-divisions, viz. Chanchal and Malda Sadar. Gazole is under Malda Sadar Sub-division and has fifteen Gram Panchayats such as Alal, Chaknagar, Karkach, Raniganj-II, Bairgachhi-I, Deotala, Majhra, Sahajadpur, Bairgachhi-II, Gazole-I, Pandua, Salaidanga, Babupur, Gazole-II and Raniganj-I.

Goalnagra is located under Sahajadpur Gram Panchayat, which is slightly to the east of Gazole (District Gazeteer:2009). The village if approached from Balurghat side, is around three kilo meters from its nearest landmark of Jamtala Bus stop. I learnt from the local people that travelling from Balurghat down the Hily Balurghat Highway, it takes around 12 minutes to reach Goalnagra village from Jamtala. If we approach the village from Malda Town Station and advance down the Jhaljhalia Station road, it should take around an hour and an half to reach the Goalnagra village. Moving northwards to Old Malda, Sujapur, Jodupur, and then gradually after crossing Adina and Pandua we reach Alampur Bus Stand. Then going past Gazole Toll plaza to the right by 300 metres, we start taking the National Highway 512, to reach the Gazole block. If we manage to reach Alampur Bus Stand, it takes around 30 minutes to reach the Gazole Police Station. From there we reach Gazole Hospital from where we move slightly right towards Saidpur to reach Bhalukadanga Jama Masjid. Moving to the right again we reach Radha Gobinda Mondir at Dohil. From here we move slightly down towards Danga Para Jama Masjid till we go down further to Goalnagra Mosque. Digging down deeper we reach Goalnagra Primary School and finally to our destination site of Golanagra Village.

Thus we find that though there are a considerable number of villages with a population of over 1500, we chose this village for its idiosyncrasies. It must be mentioned that this village was moderately placed from the district headquarter, which meant commuting would not be out of place. An important social process in Goalnagra, especially Gazole was the process of the urbanization of the village. The process was yet to be studied and its many implications and consequences were yet to be well understood and inferred. It has been going on for time memorial without people realizing the impact of this process. The urbanization had an impact on the education of the village especially on the girls which awaited thorough enquiry. I felt that commuting to this place off and on would enable me

understand the vibes of this urbanizing impact on education. However, I need to spell out here that why I decided to focus on this village and its girls.

Besides, I looked for a high school because one in the vicinity often throws up a retired village teacher who seems to be a ship of resources about the village. In my study in another remote, rather very remote village of Singabad Tilason in Habibpur block of Malda where I had no leads and was at my wits end because I thought with no torchbearer, I may have to start from the scratch. However, meandering inside the village for days at an end, I came across a retired high school teacher who not only enlightened me with his thoughtful and keen insight about the village but to my utter surprise I was gifted with a book penned by him on the village I was studying and the one he lived in. Though school teachers prefer relocating to towns or to nearby urban areas, still they tend to help you with an iota of local resources, which researchers like me keep hankering after. It is a rare luck to find a teacher staying in the village itself. The oral narratives often helped me fill up the interstices of my bigger story that I was rustling up. A school and as I said, preferably a high school was of great help and I always hunted for a village which houses one or two schools either within it or at its backyard.

I focused on the adolescent girls and the schools they went spoke a lot about their tales of joys and woes. Surprisingly my village offered me not just two schools in its vicinity, viz. Badhnagra High School and Lokkhipur High School but the bumper surprise came in the form of a Madrassah that was right in middle of the village which was supposed to be the staple source of education for the girls. Jamea Fatemazzohra Girls' Madrassah was located right beside the Mosque in Golanagra village where around 80 percent of its girls attended. I wanted to study these schools and this Madrassah in particular to bring out the educational scenario in Golanagra village. More particularly, I wanted to study the Muslim girls in the village and their sphere of education. Before studying the Muslim girls, let us have a brief idea of the South Asian Muslims and their revival in Modern India, especially their systems of education and their importance.

In this connection a brief history of the Muslims of South Asia will not be out of place. I chose to study the history of South Asian Muslims for that was a very chequered history that must be studied to understand the impact it had on education of the Muslim girls, especially the indigenous education for their girls through Kutubs, Moktams and Madrasa. Let me finish with a brief idea of the South Asian Muslims before tracing the origins of the Madrassahs in India through the historical rubrics. Against this background, we shall try studying the girls of Goalnagra and the Madrasa they attend. This shall help us connect the contemporary Madrasa with the past and whether that has anything to do with the empowerment of the Muslim girls in Goalnagra now, as we are all set to find out. Let us start with the Muslims in South Asia, before we move to their Madrasas and then finally inside Goalnagra.

Muslims in South Asia

South Asia comprises of a widely spread geographical area, which is almost half the size of Europe. This region in particular had been a well-defined geographical unit harboring many cultures and especially being influenced by the Hindu traditions. The South Asian subcontinent is a particular rich site for the study of Islam. Muslims in this sole region constitute around a third of the entire Muslim population in the world¹. South Asian Muslims are growing up exorbitantly. In 1901, their population was approximately 63 million and in 1941, it grew up to 94 million, their number climbed further to 243 million in 1981 and their number steeply rose to around 300 million in 1991. It rose still further to 430 million in 2000. This included two Muslim majority countries, for instance, Pakistan with 150 million and Bangladesh with some 140 million (Jamal:2008).

Being identified as a mine of treasures, a region resilient enough to absorb many cultures, South Asia has Muslims divided mostly among these three countries of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. South Asian Muslims constitute a very substantive portion of the world's Muslims. As noted above,

¹ Metcalf, Barbara D. 2009. *Islam in South Asia in Practice*. Princeton University Press.

it is almost as much as United State's entire population of Muslims. They are now divided among the nation states whose demographic and political characteristics are quite heterogeneous. Among these, we find that Pakistan is the only state in the whole world created explicitly on the basis of its Muslim population. Whereas the other countries, especially Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and the tiny Maldives also have populations that are primarily Muslim. It is only when we come to India that we find a lion's share of its population is non-Muslim. Nevertheless, its Muslim population is still the third largest in the world following Indonesia and Pakistan. In the rest of the countries in South Asia, such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, Muslim are even today largely a political minority. Interestingly, India with approximately around 140 million Muslims is the largest Muslim minority worldwide². Now that we have acquainted ourselves with the demographics of South Asia, let us look into its deep seated traditions.

Sufism: The umbilical cord of Islamic Education?

Islam in South Asia has its own characteristics which stood out for its richness and the variety of its articulations throughout our history. Such a succulent diversity has been shaped by the subcontinent's multiple linguistic and cultural traditions and its clear cut network beyond the region. There had been differences in the Islamic ways of life, especially when discerning for the yardstick for cultural and political life of the Islamic society. The differences sound louder in the modern times when the stand points are many. However, it may be reasserted that in terms of Islamic practice, Sufism in some form or the other been at the heart of Islamic devotional and spiritual life in South Asia. Sufism or *tasawwuf*, under the garb of Islamic mysticism often involves the accommodation of ethical norms, the cultivation of an inner life that among others encourage devotion to elders and holy men, living and dead, who may serve as teachers, guides, exemplars, intercessors and charismatic leaders. Sufism's core institution is composed of a subtle relation between the Mentor and his disciple, which is a long enduring relationship or *Silsila*. This tradition is often traced back over time to the Prophet Mohammad. Though there are different strands showcasing distinctive styles or *tariqa* of devotional practices and teachings. Sufism undoubtedly can be taken as the premier institution of the Islamic religion, the tenets of which determined the educational and other practices of the Islam (Minault: 1998).

Sufism grew and took a consolidated form under the sustained Muslim rule in the sub-continent. Mention must be made of two extremely popular conduits of the Islamic world who generously influenced the Muslims and these two men of great repute were Mahmud Ghaznavi in the eleventh century and Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century under their regime, Sufism flourished in these centuries from North Africa to Central Asia (Jamal:2008).

Sufism is also called Tasawwuf and it is a kind of a mystical movement whose origin can be recounted to the inception of the Islamic rule. It is said that Sufism might be taken as a kind of movement within the very core of Islam (Attar 1973). However, there is one essential difference between Islam and Sufism. While Islam and the various theological cults and sects search for God through Holy Scriptures and their cannons, Sufism marks a distinction. Sufism tries to touch the almighty through its aesthetic ways of diligence, self-exercise, measured intelligence and intense emotion. For them approaching the Absolute through Islamic jurisprudence is far narrower and parochial (Shah 1979). Women all over the world are doing exactly this. They are defining their religion in their own ways beyond the dictates of Islamic theology and metaphysics. This is what the current trend of the unprecedented and stupendous rise of a large numbers of Muslim women indicate. From the very impactful mobilization and partaking of the Iranian revolution of 1979 to their articulated presence in North Africa, Indonesia and the world over, the trend had refused to stop (Haeri 2020) . Getting education and informed upbringing, women are going through a wave of gender reflexivity that has instigated a newer kind of awakening in such regions. They are trying to shed off their inhibitions of cultural and religious stereotypes and are struggling hard to defy the misogynist constructions of

2 Malik, Jamal. 2008. *Islam in South Asia: A Short History*. BRILL.

gender binaries, sense of justice and the social cleavages that come their way. One may mark, this mobilization is not just confined to far off East and Middle East, but also in an obscured village in a ramshackle district in Bengal, we might detect the early signs of such articulation.

Ways of articulation: Aiza Banu, a case in point

As I wandered across the village of Goalnagra, what stuck my attention were the dainty girls who were trying hard to define their fate in their own ways often unmindful of the officious gazes of the patriarchy. Ignorant of the stubborn Western narratives engendered by the bigots of Orientalism, these girls were making their own life-worlds. It is great to watch such balancing acts on a skimpy rope of fate by the Muslim women as they go on to negotiate with the exigencies of their life. Straddling against the dusty summer roads, I came to knock the door of Aiza Banu whom I have already met in Fatemazzohra Girls' Madrasa in Goalnagra. Her words stuck me in the Madrasa I visited because I was touched by her sheer innocence and a sense of impeccability engrossing her. I could sense something was amiss because she was reticent and quiet and did not quite buzz with words as other fidgety girls of her age did. She had caught my fancy and I wanted to know more about her but as I was conducting a focused group discussion within a school premise, my scope was constricted. She nevertheless left an indelible mark on me and I could not dare forget her. She remained clouded in my mind and whenever I made a trip to Malda, I harvested a strange longing for her. I collected her address from the Madrasa and this time I reached all the way to her adjoining village home to meet her.

She was seated beside her mother who welcomed me gleefully. I was meeting Aiza Banu after quite sometimes and could not understand how her reaction would be. With bated breath I approached Aiza, making wild guesses whether she could recall me altogether, but no, she recognized immediately she saw me. I had lost her contact number and it was not possible for me to intimate her beforehand. Giving her a sudden visit might unnerve her and I feared this mousy girl may not show up altogether, but surprisingly she seemed jolly and far more amiable than the last time I met her.

Aiza loves to do house works and her hands are always full. From stitching sundry clothes to broom her sundeck, she is always up to something. However, there is a dismal and dreary look in her face which is difficult to ignore. Her wry smile still hurts me and I frantically searched for a cause. Amidst the clucking of the hens and the quacks of the ducks and the vendors crying their wares, Aiza sits still at a corner of her room all lost in her world. After a prolonged conversation about multiple facets of the village, her mother comes to the point. She bemoaned Aiza was married for a year and a half before she was sent back to her maternal home. Farida Bibi, Aiza's mother lamented that she had almost become bankrupt in marrying off her daughter but had never dreamt even in her worst nightmare that her daughter would return home all dejected and deserted. Her in-laws complained of her reserved and taciturn soul and that she was too absorbed in her own self and barely took interest of others round her. Her husband, a young man in his twenties too did not take much interest in Aiza and was rather relieved when she was packed back home by his parents.

Rashid barely stayed with Aiza because he had to migrate soon after marriage to Kerala where he worked as a mason under a contractor building roads and highways for the state. Now, this was a demographic problem hovering over most men in Malda. With very slim prospects of job, most of the uneducated, semi-educated and semi-skilled young men migrated out of the district in search of better opportunities. They worked under the whims of a handful of erratic and unsettled contractors whom they worshipped like Gods. With no other alternative stratagems to find work, the young men were coopted like pawns by such contractors who managed those works outside the state and chose to be their saviors for life. Such young men came from very poor families and were ready to do almost anything to escape this hopeless and grim world of unemployment and abject poverty. The contractors wooed these blue-collar workers with a morsel of rice for their family and a job on a few days contract and this was enough to lure them. However, the laborers had to pay a hefty price to ensure a steady flow of such contracts and often abnegated their social lives to please the contractors and feed the famished ones at home. This often took a toll on their social lives especially the tottering as well as the wobbling conjugal relations they are about to start.

Rashid hardly lived with Aiza and so their relationship was too pre-matured and staggering to die such a shocking death. When I asked Aiza, was it all true, I mean the allegations charged against her by her in-laws and her husband? She vehemently nodded her head as if in disbelief to ground her state, a state which I think nobody had asked her to clarify before. They were all too overwhelmed with her husband and her in-laws and what they felt about Aiza. Aiza was lost in the hum-drum of the hearsays for no one had ever thought that Aiza could have a stand too.

Aiza spoke less and remained lost in her world and this was nothing new for her family which knew how she was. She hardly took others into account unless of course they were strikingly significant for her and of course Aiza did not consider this any malady. At most she was happy go lucky with no indignation for any one. She was an average learner in school and probably had certain learning issues which no body had taken note of. Perhaps, she was a slow learner and had to repeat classes often but that did not dither her from completing her high school. What propelled her further was a deep quench for knowledge and a sense of inquisition which accompanied her wherever she went. Moreover, she stitched hand embroidered colorful table mats, pillow covers, bangles and rags that were strewn all over her house but with a handful of her people to take cognizance of. She was reticent and kept to herself without gelling with her peers. When I visited her, she was trying to show up a happy face despite all those annoyances which peeved her. Her mother grumbled that Aiza could have better stayed back a few more days in her in-laws to overcome the outrage of her husband who thought she was a good for nothing and is a misfit for his home. Aiza tried hard to woo her husband but constant bickering and bad fights had repelled her. She did not want to be there with her husband any more whatever be its cost. She silently rued, *shohorer sathe sangsar korlam koydin, je or qurbat hobo?* (How many days did I stay with my husband that I will turn into her darling princess?). This was very unlikely for a reserved and a tight-lipped girl like Aiza who hardly expresses her likings and desires but her statement was a fountain of her deep sense of agony, especially the agony of rejection, which she had surprisingly conquered with her bold decision to step out of an ugly marriage herself. Farida Bibi still mourns at the disgrace it brought for her family and her ilk. She was taken aback by her daughter and that Aiza did not wait for her turn to be deserted by her husband but instead rebuffed him. This was unlikely and far-fetched for uncontentious and un-combative girls like Aiza and few could imagine her taking such a fearless and intrepid step in her life and that too in the prime days of her life. This was much in contrast to her feisty friends many of whom are still bearing the pangs and twinges of a broken marriage instead of terminating it all over. Farida Bibi says dissolving the marriage had not helped Aiza because she is still in awe with the fantasies, marriage had probably weaved around her. Marriage must have been a shooting star for Aiza which almost faded and melted before she could blink her eye. Farida Bibi went on to recount, with her siblings getting married around her, Aiza was reliving both the aura and the pathos of her own marriage. The dark pastel shades of her embellished kurti with the *Zardosi lehenga*, sequined *Sharara-Kurta* set and the gorgeous *Dupatta*, all reminded her of her shattered marriage.

However, Aiza was not grumbling for she was contented to have her life her way without compromising with the priorities of the others. When Aiza's *fufi* curses her that it is against the *Hadith* to defy one's husband and rebut his parents and that she has lost her permit to *Zannat* for this sinful act, she seemed unruffled. Aiza instead gathers herself and says she is not the first one to challenge the religious orthodoxy which so long had been misinterpreting the role of religious learning in defining feminism. She gives me examples of the legendary Queen of Sheba and the eleventh century Queen Arwa (Warburton 1993) who had already voiced this heretic claim and suggested change long ago. When I asked her how did she know so much? She blushes only to reveal secretively that she along with some of her friends have started re-reading Quran and the Hadith. I said they have already read this in the Madrasa and the Maulvis had made sure that the girls be taught Arabi as rigorously as possible. Aiza says this is not the Hadith that they have learnt to read but was somewhat different. They have made up a girls' gang and are trying all possible ways to explore the world of religious learning obscured to them. With their limited resources, this seemed quite difficult but they are head strong in their endeavour.

Aiza has even enrolled herself with some of her friends in an online course of Islamic History

to know more about all those feminine figures who had challenged the religious bigots and had assumed political power in their own hands. Islamic history was close to her heart and she longed for a graduation and a post-graduation in the subject, only to be yanked out of college when her marriage was unceremoniously fixed. She is happy she could relive her dreams. She beseechingly looks at me lest I report her deviant acts to her *fufi*. I reassured her that I would not and instead bought her some extra data packs so that she can enjoy uninterrupted sessions of online history classes with least glitch. She however complained, Goalnagra has very poor network cloud and the girl gang has to gather in and around Madrasa for a better internet coverage. When I asked her, aren't they scared of getting caught by the self-proclaimed guardians of the Madrasa, that mousy little girl did not skirt my question. She assured me the world is changing and so should be Goalnagra, come what may. Aiza had a strange look in her eye and trust me, I could not recognize this new found Aiza.

Conclusion

Women like Aiza are not exceptional, their numbers are rising as they are getting noticed for their audacity to question the patriarchy and the supremacy of the sacred texts. They are no longer ready to submit their vulnerability and gullibility to the orthodox hierarchy. Girls like Aiza are using a double edged weapon to counter life. They have come to question those who had been giving wrongful definitions of empowerment and femininity under the religious robe. They are searching desperately for all those women who historically had enriched religious knowledge and taken charge of religious authority. Secondly, they are reinterpreting the *Quran* and the *Hadith* as seemingly more gender neutral, accommodative and inclusive. It is time we cherish to have more Aizas around us instead of shackling them in the iron cages of blind religion and hidebound closure.

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