

## **Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have examined the relationship between print culture and the construction of gender relations in colonial India. I studied Urdu women's journals published during the colonial period. Because Urdu is generally associated with Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, my study relates to the gender construction among Muslims of the period. I have explored the complex relationship between Muslim female and male intellectuals and the Urdu print culture, and the way the intellectuals negotiated the question of gender in the context of colonial modernity.

British colonialism relied heavily upon the status of native women for seeking moral justification to establish its hegemony and rule over India. The colonial state took a strong critical note of the native culture and used the status of women as an indicator to measure the position of Indian society on the scale of civilisation. The dismal position of native women provided the colonial state enough scope to project itself as superior and in scaling the Indian civilisation as very low on the 'ladder of civilisations'.

The gendered colonial discourse was very soon responded to by the native middle class Indian intellectuals. Having been made to feel inferior by the miserable position of women, they took up the responsibility of correcting the corrupt institutions of India, particularly those concerning women, by reforming them. The various social reform movements that emerged in different parts of colonial India in the nineteenth century were, in many ways, a response to the cultural criticism levelled by British colonialism.

Almost all the social reformers saw a remedy to the social malady India had been suffering from in the education of women. Therefore, educating women became the most significant aspect of the entire social reform project. The reformers not only undertook a rigorous campaign in favour of women's education, dispelling the various wrong notions people held concerning the same, but also started establishing schools for girls and publishing 'suitable' reading material for them. The domain of social reform was not the exclusive preserve of men alone. Women, who were the 'objects' of reform in the beginning, became 'subjects' in due course of time and took up the task of reforming the conditions of women into their hands. As a part of their educational mission, the women reformers exploited the newly available print technology extensively and published several journals to refashion the minds of women.

As a part of the all India phenomena, the Muslim reformers, too, felt the need for restructuring gender relations in Muslim families and society. The social reform movement among the Muslims of Indian subcontinent was spearheaded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who emphasised the need for taking to English education. However, his focus was men, not women. He denied modern education to women and keeping it exclusively for men. However, his successor reformers like Syed Mumtaz Ali treated the women's issues with utmost seriousness and adopted a more sympathetic and warm approach towards them.

With all the situational limitations of the early Muslim male reformers, they would be credited for having taken up the initiatives in order to question many of the prevalent patriarchal notions in the contemporary social setup. There were certainly 'social risks' involved on the part of the reformers while undertaking such measures.

The reform efforts of male intellectuals bore fruits in mobilising women on to the stage of reform. Men thought that, without the cooperation of women, their efforts at reform would not succeed. They were successful in recruiting women in the reform mission. Women joined the project because they realised that their involvement in the same benefitted them the most. Thus, the ground prepared by male social reformers was ably used by the women intellectuals and social reformers. With the entry of women into the writing domain, the latter acquired sharpness and started flowing in newer directions unattended by male reformers. Being victims of the various social evils, women could speak against them in the first person and with vehemence.

Women's entry into the field of social reform could also be taken as an indicator of the growing gender consciousness among them. As discussed earlier, women felt that mere reliance on male benevolence for resolving their problems was a problem in itself and, therefore, they needed to take up the project of reforming themselves. Writing, speaking, publishing, organising and mobilising were some of the important activities that women reformers undertook to bring changes in the conditions of women in particular and the society in general.

The late nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a few women writers, who took charge of the project of reforming the conditions of women. Rashid un Nissa, Akbari Begum and Muhamamdi Begum occupied a prominent place among the early women writers in Urdu. Their writings were quite influential in terms of furthering the reformist agenda with a focus on women's issues. However, the feminist historiography on colonial Indian Muslim women either ignored these important writers completely or, pushed them to the foot notes.

As the twentieth century dawned, the number of women writers in Urdu increased. The entry of more number of women into the field of writing was possible because of the availability of the fast growing print culture and also the active support rendered by the male writers. Initially, as I have demonstrated, the women writers mimicked their male counterparts. Later on, they began to properly represent themselves. In this way, women authors not only came forward to address their issues but also successfully strive to measure up to the intellectual achievements of the male writers. In other words, with their intellectual enterprise of writing and reflecting on the issues of contemporary concern, the women writers broke the hegemonic patriarchal notion that women could not match men in terms of intellectual potential. Through the act of writing, women intellectuals not only proved their self-worth but also claimed an honourable place in the male dominated society.

The early women writers made their debut by writing books (novels) or biographical accounts. This allowed them to focus on limited issues only. However, with the founding of the women's magazines in the beginning of the twentieth century, women started expressing themselves on a variety of issues, resulting in their increased visibility in the public sphere. The earliest women's journals in Urdu, as the women's journals in other Indian languages, were started by men with or without the contribution of women. Later on, women entered the field of publishing, and many of the women's journals began to be edited by them. Women's active involvement in journalism was an indicator of their action-oriented outlook, as agents of social change. As I have presented in the tabular format, as many as twenty nine women's journals were published in Urdu language during the colonial period.

I have argued that apart from providing a space to women to express themselves on a range of issues that concerned them, the women's magazines served as debating grounds, where women debated on a particular issue or issues, at some length, allowing for the flourishing of diverse points of view from among which the readers could choose. What is remarkable to note is that a number of enthusiastic women made effective use of the newly available space, wherein they actively participated, resisted the perceived understanding of women's place and role in society and powerfully confronted the patriarchal ideology. The women's magazines present to us the picture of women as discussants, debaters and negotiators of the various issues concerning them and the larger society. The women's magazines made the picture of assertive women clear.

We have also seen how the women's magazines promoted gender consciousness among women in a number of ways. The female subscribers not only contributed articles for the magazines but were also engaged in the various debates that came up. This intellectual engagement helped women form a broader outlook and a better understanding concerning gender issues. The contributors and subscribers of the women's journals converted the 'private spheres' i.e. their homes as debating zones where they discussed the issues related to them with other members of their families. This is to say that an entire home was involved in the contemporary discussions.

The women's journals connected women with each other. Now women could explore an entire new world without taking the risk of coming out of their homes, the den of patriarchy. Network building and the bonding of sisterhood was largely facilitated by the women's journals.

The Urdu women's magazines were not community-exclusive; rather, they were inclusive in terms of accommodating the issues and debates concerning non-Muslim women also. This is reflected in the space provided to women's organisations, which had larger Hindu concentration, and also to the issues discussed which largely concerned Hindu women. To this extent, the Urdu women's journals and their contributors could overcome the narrow religious considerations and forge the identity of women as *women*. This sensitivity towards the issues of 'other' women was the need of the contemporary women's movement and Muslim women, with their inclusive nature, contributed to the strengthening of the pan-Indian women's movement: the Urdu women's magazines played a significant role in this regard.

The women's journals discussed a number of issues concerning women. Among them, the issue of 'parda' was hotly debated. The *longue duree* prevalence of the custom, as most of the Muslim women intellectuals perceived, acted as a blockade to women's mobility and their visibility in the public sphere. 'Parda', which operated at many levels, received varied responses from women writers in the magazines. We have seen that, to oppose the practice of parda, women reformers adopted many strategies. First, they referred to the scriptures to expose the customary nature of parda and to establish unequivocally that the practice had no sanction in religion. Second, they discussed the harmful effects parda had on the women's health. Third, they advocated a change in the dress code to bypass the strictness of parda. An alternative was given in the form of *burqa*. *Burqa*, with modifications made from time to time in its design to make it more attractive, provided women the chance to come out of their homes, without offending the supporters of parda. The other changes suggested in the women's dress were that tight trousers were to be replaced with loose and comfortable *Lehangas* or *Ghararas*.

The issue of women's education received much focus in the second half of the nineteenth century. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan advocated home learning for women. Both Deputy Nazir Ahmad and Altaf Hussain Hali popularized the virtues of women's home-based education through their protagonists, Asghari and Zubaida Khatun, respectively, who managed things nicely in their homes. Rashid un Nissa emphasised the importance of a mother's education in the upbringing of her children. The purpose of women's education, the early male and female intellectuals and reformers strongly felt, was to turn women into perfect wives and mothers and skilful managers of the home. It was not for their own sake, but for the sake of the family. If women were educated, the families ran smoothly, if they were not, the families suffered miserably.

We have also observed that, apart from being moved by the plight of women, there was a personal element involved in the efforts of male social reformers. Deeply influenced by the Western culture, particularly with regard to man-woman relationship and family life, the Western-influenced-men longed for companionate wives, who could provide them enlightened company both in personal and public life. These concerns were echoed in their advocacy of women's education. That was the reason why we find the curriculum of women's education being carefully designed to suit the changing needs of men in the colonial context. Ensuring a happy conjugal life for the Western-influenced/educated man was one of the principal objectives of women's education as envisioned and advocated by men. Despite this limitation in such an advocacy of women's education, the fact was that women did get benefitted by it.

Though women echoed the male agenda of women's education in the beginning, broadly, from the 1920s on, a shift concerning the objective of women's

education could be discerned in the writings of women intellectuals. Now, the women writers in the magazines moved beyond the model of competent domesticity i.e. making women better mothers and perfect wives. Education was now demanded for making public careers in terms of taking up government jobs. Demand for setting up of a women's university grew stronger with the passage of time, indicating women's strong desire for higher educational opportunities and the consequent careers they would bring.

Another significant issue that engaged the serious attention of women intellectuals and hotly debated in the pages of the women's journals for a very long time was polygamy. Given the fact that Prophet Muhammad himself had many wives, discarding polygamy was not so easy. However, the women intellectuals found it to be a pressing problem that needed to be abolished for ensuring the happy conjugal life of women. Therefore, they devised certain intelligent strategies and contested the practice by advancing arguments on both religious and secular bases.

The women intellectuals re-interpreted the scriptures to question the validity of polygamy and its relevance to contemporary times. They argued that though, undoubtedly, the scriptures allowed the polygamy, it was not unconditional. The condition of 'equal justice' to all wives was impossible to meet with, they emphasised. Further, they stated that it was a well-established fact that the provision of maintaining equal justice had always been subjected to patriarchal interpretations, resulting in the thorough victimisation of women. The provision of maintaining equal justice had always been interpreted as sharing equal time with all the wives. But, the women intellectuals disagreed with such an interpretation for it was superficial without an element of soul embedded in it. They argued that love should be the basis



of justice, and sharing love equally with all the wives was impossible and, therefore, the provision of polygamy was redundant. Further, the women writers devised a new strategy to effectively confront polygamy. They decided not to rely on the support of men since the formers' interests are worst affected by this institution. Therefore, they took a pledge not to marry their daughters to any man, who was already married. This pledge of women gathered momentum as a number of women expressed their support in the various women's magazines.

The realisation of women that they could not rely too much on the benevolence of men pushed them into the field of grassroots activism, which, as we have seen, was manifested in the foundation of a large number of women-managed women's organisations, which started emerging right from the dawn of the twentieth century. Starting from 1905, women's organisations such as the Anjuman Tehzib un Niswan, Anjuman Khatun Hamdard, and Anjum Khawateen Lahore were founded. These organisations were small groups of activist women, which provided women access to the public space, where they discussed the secular issues concerning them, although in a limited way. However, the major advance was made with the foundation of the All Indian Muslim Ladies' Conference in 1914 by Begum Shah Jahan of Bhopal. This was the first pan-Indian Muslim women's organisation, which not only extended the horizon of women's public operations but also galvanised the women's movement. The Urdu women's magazines played an extraordinary role in informing the regular activities of the various women's organisations to the women located in far off places. Apart from publishing the proceedings of individual women's organisations/conferences, the magazines published the speeches of women delivered at such organisations/conferences. Thus, the women's journals gave wide publicity to women's activism and took the message of the women's movement to the larger

audience. The women's organisations and the women's journals, no doubt, were instrumental in the making of the Muslim women's movement in colonial India.

Contrary to the dominant historiographical understanding that the social reform movement faded away as the nationalist movement progressed, the image that the Urdu women's journals project is that, rather than fading away, the social reform movement marched ahead as the nationalist movement progressed. In the 1920s, women's political consciousness steamed up. Large number of Muslim women participated in the Non-cooperation and Khilafat movements. It was around the same time, in 1927, that the All India Women's Conference was founded, which boosted the morale of other women's organisations, including the Muslim women's organisations. The Muslim women's movement closely worked with the pan-Indian women's movement and, in the process, strengthened itself, and contributed to the consolidation of Indian women's movement. Muslim women's involvement in the nationalist politics increased not only their political consciousness but also their gender and women's rights consciousness.

Though women fought against British imperialism, yet they depended on it for amelioration of their problems. Unlike most of the nationalist men, they did not treat the interference of colonial state in the domestic matters of the natives as wholly unwelcome. Rather, they welcomed it. That was the reason why, as we have seen, they undertook a sustained campaign for ensuring legislations that benefitted the community of women. The passage of the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), the Shariat Act (1937) and the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act (1939) during the heyday of the nationalist movement bear ample testimony to this fact. To this extent,

the colonial Muslim women's movement had a paradoxical relationship with colonial state.

Given the historiographical limitations where Muslim women's history is largely ignored, and where it is attended to, some aspects being missed out, my thesis has attempted to fill a gap. It attempted to retrieve many of the forgotten Muslim women's voices, and throw light on the multiple shades of their understanding on issues concerning them. The thesis has attempted to explore a new meaning and by implication, a new life to the core source material – Urdu women's journals. The thesis, one would hope has not only added to the gender history of modern South Asia but also lay focus on our understanding of the same. Further, it has dispelled the wrongly held notion that the Muslim women lagged behind their counterparts in other religious communities in terms of possessing progressive ideas and effecting social change.