

# Fleeting Impressions

## A Girls' College in Lucknow

*A visit to the Karamat Husain Girls' College proved an eye-opener. Battling stiff opposition in the early 20th century, its founder maintained his inherent belief that women's education was a precondition for advancement of the country and community. Even today, a similar spirit pervades the hearts and minds of its teaching staff.*

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Muslims were invisible in Kurukshetra, a small town in Haryana. I have no memory of meeting a Muslim student or a teacher at the university campus. Occasionally, one would hear people talk about the partition and the havoc it caused in the region. Predictably, the 'Muslim fanatics' would be held responsible for the murders, rapes and abductions that took place in 1947-48. Sometimes, I heard vague references to Muslims being backward and conservative, and their women being subservient to the 'shariat' laws. Later in life, I realised why such images were conjured up in popular imagination, and how Islam and

the Muslim community were reified.

My recent visit to Lucknow, once the capital of the nawabs of Awadh, was an eye-opener. For one, it brought about a significant change in my understanding of the role and status of Muslim women. Yes, I saw scores of 'burqa'-clad women in and around sheesh mahal, a predominantly shia locality, but I also discerned an air of confidence in their movement, gestures and public conduct. Yes, I heard stories of Muslim girls either not being sent to school by their parents or the high dropout rate. Yet my exchanges with people indicated clear signs of a perceptible change in the attitude towards the education of their girls. You may still hear a few hot-headed 'mullahs' fulminating against the

'irreligious' teaching imparted in schools outside the madrasa system, but the overall consensus amongst the community is to educate their girls in the traditional as well as the modern systems of education.

The Karamat Husain Girls' College, housed in a building across the Gomti river, exemplifies this. Founded by Syed Karamat Husain (1854-1917), a judge of the Allahabad High Court, this school was born out of the conviction that women's education was a precondition for the advancement of the country and community. It was a bold and important venture, and in tune with the reformist spirit generated by Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of the Aligarh Muslim University. Yet there was stiff opposition to his initiative. One friend told Karamat Husain that god would curse him (colloquially, that god would 'blacken his face'). Karamat Husain retorted that in any case, his face was already black, so it could hardly get much blacker. On another occasion, he pointed out to an opponent: "It is far better that I should be cursed and Muslim women educated, than that I should retain my good name, but Muslim women remain in ignorance". Reading these lines in *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* by Gail Minault, I was reminded of the resentment generated by Syed Ahmad Khan to his project of starting the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh.

Today, the spirit of the founders of Karamat Husain Girls' College lives on in the hearts and minds of the teaching staff. Says Noor Khan, lecturer in English: "this institution symbolises our determination to educate girls and equip them to compete in the wider world. We want to convince the parents that the benefits of a girls' college outweigh its dangers. Sometime back, it was hard to persuade them to let their daughters out of the house to go to school. Now, the old attitudes are changing. My own mother was withdrawn from this school by my grandmother. She was haunted by the spectre of 'angreziat' (westernisation). Such apprehensions do not exist anymore. More and more Muslim girls aspire to gain access to this school." This is illustrated by the fact that nearly 40 per cent of the 3,000 students are Muslim girls. They pay a paltry sum of Rs 650 per annum for their education. Some of them turn up wearing the burqa; others do not. Some would say that the symbols of the past and present coexist without any obvious tension.

You do not just see mosques and minarets in Lucknow; you also notice large and small schools in the lanes and by-lanes of the city. Some are government-aided; others are supported by charitable institutions. In addition, community initiatives, such as the one undertaken by the shia leader Maulana Kalb-i Sadiq, have led to a mushroom growth of educational institutions. Educating girls appears to be central to their agenda. Sadly, however, Muslim politicians have not done enough to support their activities.

Coming out of the Karamat Husain Girls' College, I recalled the words of Amina Pope,

a Canadian woman who had converted to Islam and was the first principal of the new Muslim Girls School, that no community can progress if its mothers are illiterate and unable to give adequate guidance to their children. In the words of the 19th century scholar, Mumtaz Ali, "an educated woman can take care of herself better than an inexperienced, uneducated, mentally confused bundle of veils which has not been allowed to develop self-confidence and cannot take care of herself". Contrary to my earlier impression, the Muslim women I encountered in Lucknow have long been converted to this idea. **EPW**