

COURAGE UNLOCKED

PERSONAL STORIES OF
MUSLIM WOMEN'S LIVES,
STRUGGLES AND
LEADERSHIP

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INDIA • SINGAPORE • MALAYSIA



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FOREWORD



Society in our country whether we accept it or not, is patriarchal. All books, articles, biographies are devoted to the men of India's civil society, much more frequently than to women. When an initiative is taken to portray and highlight the life stories of women leaders of our country, the result is the book in your hand by Zakia Soman and Noorjehan Safia Niaz of the Bharat Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA). The second section of the book is the most informative and is a must read. It details achievements of several of the women leaders of BMMA. You may approve most of the choices, but the book deserves to be read by all Muslims to keep our sense of current history, and by other communities for a perspective of Muslim women's participation in the development of our nation, India, and the struggles for their freedom.

The 14 women chronicled in this book have gone through many challenges to emerge as leaders of the community. They have shown exemplary courage despite many not having formal education. They have challenged the entrenched patriarchy and have led from the front in their fight for equality and justice. The leaders are true to their slogan of 'My Struggle, My Leadership' – *Jiski Ladai Uski Agwai*.

This book is inspiring and provides a great impetus to any women to question patriarchy and find the courage to lead the change and bring in sustainable transformation in the society.

Zakia Soman and Noorjahan Safia Niaz's effort goes a long way in unveiling the Muslim women's leadership and puts the Muslim women on its well-deserved pedestal.

Bader Sayeed

Advocate High Court – Chennai

President – ROSHNI Chennai

PREFACE



This book happened in the midst of the pandemic when each of the BMMA leaders were involved in relief work to the most poor and distressed families, not just Muslims but all those who needed it. They showed exemplary confidence, fearlessness and deep passion to serve people.

This is a qualitative study of 15 Muslim women in India. A lot has been written about Indian Muslim women as victims of her circumstances, of her religion and culture and of patriarchy. But not much has been written about Indian Muslim women's leadership, her contribution and her achievements; especially of the last decade. And especially of those Muslim women who come from very humble and poor backgrounds. As they fought patriarchy on a daily basis, they also created their own voice and agency for facilitating transformation in the lives of fellow women. This study uses her language and her experiences to present herself to the world.

Each leader presented here is completely intertwined with the community; she is the community, and she speaks not just as a woman but also as a Muslim woman,

about her experiences, perspectives, worldview, of herself and the world around her.

These are Muslim women's personal stories of leadership in their private and public realm. These narrations have been left out by more historical documents. Even the present-day reporting is all about her being a victim of the system and its patriarchal practices; the way all along Shahbanu was depicted. Whereas, in reality Shahbanu actually challenged her discrimination in the court of law and the case went right up to the Supreme Court of the country and yet she is a victim! And the historical records and documented stories have not given as much attention to Shehnaaz Sheikh who also approached the Supreme Court to challenge the discriminatory practices within the Muslim family law. We are happy to have Shehnaaz Shaikh write a short summary of her struggles and challenges in this book.

When women tell their stories, they are giving meaning to their own lives. When they chronicle their own realities, they give life to their own narratives. While they share their life in their own words they also add to the world of knowledge of feminism. Their stories bring in more nuances in the ever-expanding understanding of gender studies. In a world torn apart by strife, poverty, despair and deprivation, their stories stand out like beacons of hope. As they unravel their lives for the world to know, they also enhance the ever-increasing need for feminization of leadership across all spectrums of life.

The purpose of the study was also to fill up the pages of feminist history with voices of Muslim women through their own lenses and their own voices and

to highlight the leadership potential and impact of Muslim women, her agency, her education, her fierce commitment and her fearlessness in the face of adversity. It is meant to create a historical record for future generations to inspire them and to educate them about the legacy that they have inherited. It is also meant to inspire more and more women to take up the charge of themselves, their community and their country.

Dr. Noorjehan Safia Niaz

Zakia Soman

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



First big thank you goes to Adv. Bader Sayeed for agreeing to write the foreword for this book and also for sharing her life history.

Deep gratitude and solidarity with Shehnaaz Shaikh who set a precedent for future generation of Muslim women to come forward and fight for their rights.

We thank all BMMA leaders for coming forward from their busy schedules to share their stories.

We thank the publishers Notion Press for publishing this book. This is the 4th book with them and they have lived up to their professional commitment and a time bound delivery of their promises.

We also take the opportunity, on behalf of our entire BMMA team to thank our respective family members, friends, colleagues for supporting us in our journeys. It would have been difficult without their unflinching support.

INTRODUCTION



As you hold this book in your hands or on your screen, the country is going through a deep churning. The year 2020 too has been a huge challenge at all levels. While the largest democracy shows the door to its autocrat and brings in a brown South Asian woman as its first vice-president, India is struggling to keep afloat its democratic edifice, bombarded by a slew of fascist measures. From lynchings of Muslim youth to 'Corona Jihad', Islamophobia is at its peak. Whether we see a formal Hindu rashtra or not is yet to be determined, but the masses are up and rising.

In January 2020, Shaheen Baugs across the country indicated the capacity of Muslim women to not just fight her own battles within the community but also take on the state by its horns. The fight against CAA/NRC/NPR saw students, academics and ordinary women, especially Muslim women out on the streets defending the very idea of India. They rose not just as Muslim women but as citizens of this country.

In this context of heightened anti-Muslim stance by the state, Muslim women represented by BMMA have been fighting for their rights within the family. Inspite of

being accused of being ‘used’ by the state for its Muslim bashing, and inspite of being called RSS-BJP-VHP, BMMA has continued its demand for a comprehensive codified gender just Muslim family law.

It is these very circumstances that have been quoted time and again refraining Muslim women from taking up their fight for their legal rights. They said, time is not right. Well, Muslim women are not waiting for the right time. The time is now. As we speak up against state atrocities, we continue to demand our rights from, not this or that party, but from the Parliament as an institution.

Muslim women have always been the centre of many academic and non-academic studies. This is an attempt to vocalise an ordinary and conventional Muslim women’s unique history, struggles, achievements in her own language and style. It is opening a window through which one sees how she lived, how she was, what she contributed.

Muslim women in India are fighting patriarchy of the larger society as well as the patriarchy entrenched in their community identity, and patriarchy that emerges because of faulty male interpretations of the religious texts. They struggle to assert for their rights within and outside the community. Most of the last 7 decades of her life as an Indian, she has been told to choose one over the other; choose the rights of the community over her own rights within as well as those emanating from the state. She and her issues were invisibalised and made to be sacrificed for the larger interest. That she is also ‘community’ never really occurred or mattered to the patriarchal mindset both within and outside the

community. This time around, she is not only fighting for own rights within the community but also fighting as an Indian and stands before the state as an equal citizen.

Islam does not have an institutionalized structure of the clerics on lines of Christianity. There is no Islamic 'pope' for final adherence. And yet clerics in India had organized themselves into institutions like AIMPLB, DUD etc. to give themselves the legitimacy and also seek the same from the larger community. These structures neither have religious sanctity or power emanating from religion nor do they have any state power. They just gave that power to themselves. This power was used or rather misused by the state for their political gains but other than that these religious organizations had no religion sanctioned authority or legitimacy. Since they themselves lacked legitimacy, Muslim women in India did not feel the need to even consider approaching them for their own legitimacy. And Muslim women's legitimacy comes from their own lived experience of patriarchy and the strong need to challenge that.

In the last decade Indian Muslim women have challenged the traditional religious male groups and rendered them open to being questioned. There was a time when the *ulemas* were taken very seriously. They are even now by a certain section but their hold has definitely loosened. They passed illogical and ridiculous fatwas bringing embarrassment to the community. They also justified all discriminatory practices against women as legal and Islamic, rendering opposition to it as heretical and blasphemous. Muslim women by entering the domain of religion challenged the very institution of these religious leaders. She not just commented and expressed her views on religion but also took a step

forward for demanding legislation. Whether it was the legislation against triple divorce or the petition to demand entry into the sanctum of Haji Ali dargah, Muslim women usurped for themselves their rightful claim to understand her religion on her own terms. She juxtaposed her own lived experiences with that of the textual injunction of the Quran which she read keeping in mind its ethical and moral framework of justice, equality, compassion, kindness, humanity and use of reason and logic.

Indian Muslim women were influenced by many in their quest for justice but they themselves had to open the doors, create their own methods of influence, give increased power and legitimacy to themselves, created through their own effort their own scholarship and understanding of Islam.

Muslim women did not want to be disempowered by her faith. She was able to distinguish between faith and cultural mores and practices that were passed off as faith. This discernment was necessary for Muslim women to extricate faith from misogynist traditions. What was the contouring of this 'faith' was also defined by women. Her faith was the faith in a universal power who would not discriminate on the basis of gender. Her faith that the creator will not empower one set of creation over the other. Her creator would not leave her hanging in the air on the mercy of fellow human beings. In short, her creator would not approve of practices like early marriage, unilateral divorce, multiple wives, *halala* and other discriminatory practices. Muslim women leaders have initiated feminist action but did not abandon their faith and this indicates how the binary between the secular and the religious is a faulty and artificial one.

Finally, religious understanding, discourse around gender and Islam, and gender just Quranic verses are spoken about in lanes and by lanes of slum communities, of chawls and middle-class homes. Religion is no longer confined to the mosques or seminaries or male congregations or Friday sermons. Muslim women's religious rights were discussed by women in seminars, conferences, public hearing, press conferences and all possible non-religious places and most importantly by women themselves and for women. And these were coupled by her rights as a citizen of the country. She broke that assumption that a Muslim woman is only a Muslim. That, that is her only identity. She broke the assumption that for her to speak as a Muslim, she must abandon her identity as a citizen and vice versa.

Faith cannot be a hindrance to feminism, provided both faith and feminisms are defined by women keeping in the mind the universal values of equality, justice, freedom, wisdom and kindness. For feminist women who have a faith to adhere to, it's a daily grind to reconcile the two, if at all. It is no longer confined to academic intellectual discussion but a lived experience of reconciliation, adjustments, forever moving towards an ideal, which does away with this binary. They are activists who face problems on a daily basis and who are expected also to solve them while they still struggle with faith based feminist principles. This is enriching and opens up new vistas of exploration and understanding. In the process of this daily grind, both faith and feminism transform and morph into a new reality and consciousness.

This book is a celebration of Muslim women's struggles and achievements. As she leads the community

and the country, addressing multiple issues, raising her voices and contributing to national life, she also celebrates her own contribution through this book. Leaving an important milestone behind of bringing in a legislation that brought relief to 80 million Muslim women, freeing them from the fear of instant divorce, she moves ahead to working towards addressing other discriminatory practices.

This book is a pat on our back!

BADER SAYEED HER JOURNEY



Ms. Bader Sayeed, born on 24th August, 1946 has completed 74 years in her life's journey and is marching ahead as a stream clean and clear. It is a perfect point in time to look back on the journey, and to assess, introspect, and share what she has learned along the way for the benefit of the younger generation and to strengthen them for the future.

She completed her Bachelor of Arts Course (Economic) at Madras University and was awarded her degree at the convocation in 1966. She obtained her Bachelor's Degree in Law in the year 1982 and enrolled in the legal profession on 20.10.1982. This was a period most unconducive for women who were interested in pursuing law as a profession. At that time, men (even men in the family) held the opinion that the legal profession did not suit women. Those who dared to step in were observed—it looked like surveillance under the male chauvinist scanner which was geared to find fault and condemn. However, Ms. Bader Sayeed took up her profession as a challenge and commenced her practice at the office of G. Subramanian Senior Advocate, Madras High Court. Apart from her passion for legal challenges, she has a deep interest in Urdu Poetry and unshakable faith in God.

Her parents came from a progressive family in Chennai. Even her husband, a neuro-physician came from a progressive family; in fact, he is her first cousin. After marriage, she stayed in Canada and America for 6 years and came back to India in 1972. Her husband has been her inspiration and backbone for her work in public life. She was close to her father and he would call her, "his son", although he had 3 sons. He put her into college work. Her family runs a college called the Justice Basheer Ahmed Sayeed College, which was then called

the SIET College. She worked there as an administrative head for 10 years. Through this work she came across hundreds of people in her public life and learnt some valuable lessons.

She has one daughter, who is also a lawyer and one son, who lives in the US. They are a great push in her life, inspiring her to do her work.

Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer was a great inspiration to her as far as scholarship and activism is concerned. She learned a great deal on Muslim law by attending his workshops and seminars.

After coming back from US, she spent time with her family. Around this time, she would meet her Muslim friends and they would ask her about polygamy and triple divorce. She would chat with them on these issues and they would wonder how such practices can happen. She would visit the school which was initiated by the Muslim Women leaders of those times where her mother was on the Board and even there the discussion would be around these issues. She would wonder if there were any answers at all. With time, she realized that there is something wrong with the law itself and that must change and that she must do something about it. Her uncle was a judge. So, she would also discuss it with him as well for a better understanding.

Biggest Achievement and Failures

After an 11 years interval she went back to study Law. Entering the scene as an advocate in 1982, she created history right from the start: she has achieved several first women positions such as the First Woman in South Asia to serve as the Chairperson of a Wakf Board [Tamil

Nadu Wakf Board from 2002–2006; First Women to be the Chairperson of the State Minority Commission in India and the First Women to be the Additional Advocate General for the State of Tamil Nadu, India [both positions simultaneously during the period 2005–2006]. Keeping abreast with recent developments in Dispute Resolution, she is also a Trained Mediator in the panel of the Madras High Court. 02. Apart from this she has also held positions such as the member of the Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Board, Correspondent of Justice Basheer Ahmed Sayeed [JBAS] College for Women [1991–1998] and Between 1997 & 1998 she has held positions such as President of Women Lawyers Association – Tamil Nadu, Member of the Jamia Hamdard University, New Delhi, President of Ladies Wing—All India Muslim Education Society, Executive Committee member of St. John's Ambulance Association, Executive Committee member of the High Court Legal Services Committee, member of the Tamil Nadu State Women Commission and member of Tamil Nadu State Haj Committee and the Executive Committee Member of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—Chennai Kendra. 03. Presently she is the Joint Secretary in the Executive Council of Southern India Education Trust [SIET]; and Founder President of ROSHNI, an NGO devoted to the causes of women, in particular for the uplift of under privileged women and children. She travelled extensively during the Gaja storm and Tsunami and did relief works; she is a member of the Red Cross Society—Chennai; Founder and member of Movement for Empowerment of Muslim Indians (MOEMIN); Patron and Member, South Asians for Human Rights. Trustee, Madras Institute of Developmental Studies, Chennai (MIDS) Member, Consultative Group on

Empowerment the 11th 5-year Plan—New Delhi; Patron Member, SAAYA—Network of Muslim Women's Association—Pudukottai. She has also been honoured with awards such as the Ugadhi Puraskar in the year 1993 for Social Welfare and Uplift of Women; 14th Annual Day Award for Women's 2 Literacy year by Boston. Matriculation Higher Secondary School; Best Education Administrator Award by the Lions Club, in the year 1996; Seva Ratna Award—Centenarian Trust in the year 1998; by Altrusa International Inc. April 2001 and the L'oreal Paris Femina Awards – 2015 Standing up for Fundamentalism.

She has equipped herself with trans national exposure regarding the challenges and strategies that the feminist and other human rights groups deal with across the globe by participating in programs such as the Study on Human Rights and the Law US sponsored by USIA which included visiting 7 cities in U.S. and meeting representatives involved in Human Rights issue in the year 1993; The Regional Workshop on “Feminist Strategies in Law” organized by Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development [APWLD] at Bangkok—Thailand in August 1997. She again participated in the Gender and Racism—Asia Pacific Lobby Training Workshop for WCAR, organized by the same organization at Chiangmai, Thailand in January 2001. She had been a delegate to the world conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and related intolerance in Durban South Africa. She was invited by the US Government as delegate to participate in the conference on World Forum on the Future of Democracy” at Williamsburg—Virginia—USA. She was also the participant in the Land, Law and Islam, UN habitat,

University of East London—Docklands—UK—May, 2007. She spoke fearlessly for the rights of the Muslim women at various forum in which many scholars like Tahir Mahmood were present. She has handled cases for liberation of bonded laborers; for the protection of rights of the women workers in the unorganized sector, of the juveniles, victims of custodial violence and of the women in minority communities in contentious areas of Family Law.

Politics

To Ms. Bader Sayeed, it was a comet in the sky that day when Amma, Puratchi Thalaivi called to meet her. She invited her to join the party. She was unaware of what was ahead and was hesitant to accept the offer. But when, Amma, Puratchi Thalaivi revealed that she was informed about the good work she was doing: this word of praise for her life's work made her accept the offer Amma was making. Little did she know at that time that this would lead her into a lengthy career. This of course led her to the dream, a dream of an All Women Political Party in Tamil Nadu. She does not know whether this dream will be realized, yet, this is her dream.

She contested in the South Chennai Parliamentary Constituency in the 2004 Parliamentary Election and received the highest number of votes compared to other candidates who contested on an AIADMK Ticket. She has been a Member of the Legislative Assembly for Triplicane Constituency during the period 2006–2011. During this tenure she served as a member of the Privileges Committee and as a member of the Estimates Committee. As a member of the assembly she has

raised issues and her contribution has made a change in policies of the Government.

She studied with Jayalalitha in the same school. She inspired and supported her to enter politics. She gave her the post of chairperson of the State Minority Commission. She also made her part of the State Commission of Women. She was asked to judge the floats during the Republic Day parade. And that brought her in the limelight and people started to ask about her. She also met Mother Teresa and felicitated her that got her recognition as a political figure.

She also got the opportunity to run for MP and MLA positions. She won as an MLA. When she stood for elections, a lot of people said, she will not even get her deposit back. She did not even know enough Tamil. So, at the age of 60, she learnt Tamil. And she finished the course. She says, “if you believe in something and put your heart and mind to it, it is possible to achieve anything”. Her mastery over Tamil language gave her a better grounding in her political work.

When she jumped in for the elections, people were angry and wondered from where and why did she come to spoil their chances. She became the poster girl for all minority issues in Tamil Nadu

The larger community felt that she will not make it in the world of politics. They would say, she is in it only because of Amma. Hardly anyone supported her for her campaigns. She is grateful to all those who stood by her then. She had to go and stand outside the masjid on Friday to ask for votes. They were all nice but they would all snigger, wondering what can she do? They would say, she comes from a good family; how can she

manage politics. Many aspersions were cast on her. But she took it all in her stride. She always says, "I don't have a Skin, I have a Hide". She tells women also to become thick-skinned. Don't harm others. If you are not doing anything wrong then don't bother about what others say. If you bother too much about what people say, you cannot live in peace and cannot work.

Women must be in the decision making, starting from the panchayat level. Of course, it calls for money and muscle power and that is why we are afraid to go there. But as women we must keep striving and build up our capacities for political work. She is not active into politics now but have been keeping her options open. Her friends laugh at her that she is still dreaming at this age. And she tells them, "why not? Dreaming does not cost, it is free, so why not dream? You never know what is in store. It is important to dream, and even if one lands on a tree top, why not? Who wants the sky? Even the Tree top is fine for achieving goals in life".

She humbly admits that God has been kind to her and continues to be so. She has an unflinching faith in god, so much that she tells her husband that this faith is even shaking the earth where she is standing. Total unflinching faith in god!

She is happy to find friends like Zakia and Noorjehan with whom she shares the vision of a codified law. She wants Muslim family law to be codified. People mostly don't understand it and assume it to be the Uniform Civil Code. But codification means that there are rules and regulations governing marriage, divorce etc. A lot of poor women would ask her about

polygamy and how it is not fair to them. She wondered, why she is not asking these questions, when the poor, illiterate women are asking. So that is how she started working around issues of Muslim women. In 1992 she started Roshni, which till date gives legal aid to all women and empowers down trodden women and gives them a VOICE.

She strongly believes that it is not possible to work with the religious leaders. They will never support Muslim women in their demands. And it is not even possible to educate them, because they don't want to be educated. They need to be silenced. They say they don't like this new law against triple divorce. But when they have issues within their own families, they realize its importance. She has cases of triple divorce even during the lock down and she has been trying to help them. In a few cases, the children were taken away from the women during lockdown. For them she filed a habeas corpus petition. She argued and cited the new law. On hearing this the lawyer of the husband says, he never said talaak. Thus, she sees in the field that the law has its impact. But everybody has to work on it, the activists, the lawyers, the woman herself. The clerics liked the Shah Banu Act but they don't like this act, why? Because it is stringent and he goes to jail.

They say the law should not be codified but look at every law in the country. We are following all the laws of the land. When it comes to them, to their daughters, they understand the importance of law. But they take a different stand when it comes to other women. We have misinterpreted the religion. There are many issues for women, but these do not reach her because of willful misinformation and misinterpretation. There are many

Quranic verses which talk of gender equality. Women have been given an equal space in Islam.

A lot of people say three years imprisonment for a man giving triple divorce is too much, but she says, let the cases come before the magistrate and let us see how it unfolds. When men pronounce divorce with impunity at, that junction they do not think about the women. This law is playing a role of a deterrent. **LET MEN NOT DIVORCE ARBITRARILY. WHY WILL THEY GO TO JAIL, IF THEY REFRAIN FROM TRIPLE DIVORCE?**

Muslim men also feel entitled to have more than one wife. "What is use of being Muslim, if I don't have three more wives"—is the mindset. She wishes the Supreme Court comes up with a judgment against polygamy and halala. Men get away with murder in our country—she laments.

When the triple divorce law was passed, many objected mainly because it came from this government. The wrong party was doing the right thing—is what is proclaimed. People have accused her of being soft to the government but this government atleast brought in a law. People say, they should not make laws for the Muslims, but to them she asks, what have the previous parties done for the Muslim women? And it is possible to raise the issues of the larger community as well as of the Muslim women. It is possible to fight at all levels and for all issues. It is not right to blame women for raising their issues. How long can you ask women to refrain from raising her concerns? Are her concerns not the concerns of the community? The entire community must demand better laws for women, instead of it remaining a cross which only women should bear.

In the year 1985, subsequent to the Supreme Court Judgment in Shah Bano's case granting Maintenance of Divorced Muslim Women, the Government of India egged by the clergy enacted a legislation prohibiting paying of maintenance to divorced Muslim Women. Ms. Bader Sayeed initiated a signature campaign in Madras and across the state to mobilize public opinion in favour of the Supreme Court verdict. The list of signatures along with a Memorandum was forwarded to members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assemblies for action. There were conflicting opinions in society on her stand. Many opposed her vehemently and few groups such as All India Lawyers Union—Tamil Nadu Chapter supported her cause. A joint meeting was organized by 5 women's groups of Tamil Nadu supporting her cause. Now the maintenance for divorced Muslim Women is welcomed by all.

She was one of the loudest voices for the codification of Muslim Law and against the hate speech, (discrimination that put fear in people.) She actively campaigned for the rights of the Muslim women to enter the mosque for prayers. She made several TV appearances and took part in all protests launched by AIADMK and other social groups. With fantastic energy and commitment, she passionately travelled across the State when she was the Chairmen of the Tamil Nadu Wakf Board.

She has impleaded herself in the Parveen Akther case which challenged triple talaq in the Madras High Court as early in 1991. She has filed a PIL against the JBAS College for Women, established and run by the Southern India Education Trust [SIET] for implementing the

Supreme Court Guidelines in Vishaka's case. This case could be referred to as her selfless, fearless commitment to the cause because when she moved this case she was part of the Executive Committee of SIET. This is also a reported case.

She has filed a PIL before the Madras High Court, Bader Sayeed Vs Union of India seeking the strict implementation of Kazi's Act of 1980 and to bring prohibition against the Kazi's from issuing Talaq Fatwas (Unilateral Talaq Certificates). Interim Orders have been issued by the High Court to this effect and now Kazis are a little reluctant in issuing talaq fatwas.

She has worked tirelessly on interfaith dialogue, communal issues in Tamil Nadu and for empowerment of Muslim women in the State. She has given several lectures on secularism, women's rights under the Constitution, women and personal Law, violence against women, constitutional review, women in the legal profession and judiciary, reservation for women as elected representatives in Parliament and Assemblies and others.

Women

Women can do a lot if they have power. You need to have power, must be heard and seen around. As it is Muslim women are looked down upon by the patriarchal society. Without education, without power it is difficult for any women to make it successful. Women must be in decision making spaces and strive to become employable graduates. They must have, not just degrees but also employable skills and competences.

Future

One BMMA is not enough, one Roshni is not enough. We need to inspire other women. They must come forward and join the mainstream. They must work with the government. We cannot be criticizing governments all the time. Muslim women must go to the Prime Minister and thank him for the law and demand codification of law. Codification of law means gender justice. “I don’t care who gives it to me, I want Gender Justice”.

She never thought in my lifetime, she will see a legislation against triple divorce. Now she prays that in her lifetime polygamy, halala and other practices also go away.

Muslim women must take up higher education. We must continuously guide our young people to take up mainstream career. Muslim girls are coming forward, a lot of development is happening and lots needs to be done. They must work, take up jobs, be assertive and show to the world that they can do it.

As Mr. M. C. Chagla says in his autobiography, “Life is many sided; it has many facets; it has many moods; it is rich with memories, sad and gay....” So goes the journey like the stream, relaxing on the almighty that, he shall ever keep it clean and clear across the horizon until it merges in his Bright Light.

NOTHING WILL WORK, UNLESS YOU DO

SHEHNAAZ SHEIKH SPECIAL STORY



“Being a secular Muslim is difficult in India. More so if you are blunt like the way Manto and Hamid Dalwai were.” Says Versova resident, Vipassana practitioner-instructor, French tutor Shehnaaz Sheikh as she deals with her multiple identities. This interview was done by Sumedha Raikar-Mhatre who asked her about the current-day relevance of being the first Indian Muslim woman who challenged the Muslim Personal law in Supreme Court way back in 1983.

At 24, divorced and thrown out of the house by her husband, she became the first Indian Muslim woman who challenged the Muslim Personal law (which upheld the right of her husband to an instant divorce) in the Supreme Court in 1983. Today at the age of 61, she wants to memorialize the bygone era in which she stood against an accepted social practice—a period which was not just momentous for her, but of consequence to any Indian who has experienced Mumbai in the two riotous decades of the last century.

Interestingly, the impact of the 1992 riots and the 1993 serial blasts in Mumbai doesn’t leave Shehnaaz even today. In January 2019, when she was watching the movie *Thackeray*, the communal conflagration came alive in her consciousness. It strengthened her resolve to tell her side of the story as a Mumbaikar, as a Muslim woman who grew up in Santa Cruz and schooled in St Teresa’s Convent, as a second year BA student pulled out of the Mithibai college and put under house arrest in Jaipur before being married off to a man twice her age. In fact she feels her years as a young divorcee coping with Muslim fundamentalists needs to be recounted at this juncture of worldwide Islamophobia. Not just while watching popular movies and plays, but she often

senses how difficult it is for Muslim secularists, men and women to maintain their sanity. “You just don’t belong and you have to keep proving your loyalty to the state. And, if you happen to be candid like Manto or Hamid Dalwai, then an added hell awaits you.” She recalls her work in the riot-ridden Mumbai of the nineties, particularly when she was living in Nagpada as part of a conscious effort to embrace the community from within.

In fact there was a period when Shehnaaz did everything to counter wrong perceptions. She completed her graduation and studied personal laws, particularly Sharia in letter and spirit, so that she could not be called an outsider. She spoke on various social fora in the city and travelled widely. Her identity as a Mumbaikar remained central to her being, in all these efforts. “Today, I have my own definition of who I am ... I am a proud Maharashtrian, a confirmed Mumbaikar, an Indian Muslim, a practicing Buddhist and above all a human being who feels honored to be born a woman. This is irrespective of being called a ‘kafir’ in the Islamic countries, a spy in Pakistan and a suspected terrorist at all international airports, thanks to my last name,” she adds in jest.

Shehnaaz’s urge to dwell on her identity crisis has been triggered by two mass movements. First, #Metoo protests of women against sexual perpetrators from across social spheres; second, women risking life and limb in a bid to enter Kerala’s Sabarimala temple. She feels an instant connect with the distinct women who have dared patriarchal power structures in their individual way. “Much like my decision to challenge a law that made me a destitute overnight, these women have questioned set systems and behaviors which are not fair. I feel a sense of proximity towards the known and faceless women who

have risen with ferocity.” She feels there is never an easy period for any rights movement, but the eighties and nineties had a special set of challenges, which is why there is a need to acknowledge the women and institutions which helped shape the national narrative in those times. “In the pre-mobile phone era, summoning a small-scale meeting of women, more so Muslim women, was tough. Similarly, doing the paperwork for a case to be fought in the country’s highest court, required unimaginable logistics,” gushes Shahnaz who at one point lived in disguise (as a Hindu with a prominent bindi) in New Delhi after she filed her first-of-its-kind petition before the Supreme Court. That was her only way to save her life against the backdrop of a fatwa issued in most mosques of the country. “I was the kafir ladki who had challenged the 1400-year-old Islam. My husband who had thrown me out of the house without notice was passé,” she observes recalling how she narrowly escaped an attack by a riotous mob wielding iron rods outside the precincts of the court.

“It was good luck and good friends which saved me, or else I could have died long ago. I have to pass the sense of gratitude to the younger generation which is not necessarily cognizant of the rich history of women’s movement in Mumbai,” says Shehnaaz who received the Neerja Bhanot award in 1993 for exceptional bravery and constructive work for women.

She is often asked about her current life as a counselor and Vipassana practitioner. There is a curiosity about the life she lived as a monk for two years at the meditation centre in Igatpuri, where she studied Pali. Her practice necessitates zones of silence for self-discovery. She has conducted Vipassana for a diverse set of audiences – the inmates of Tihar Jail, children of

orphanages and groups like Friends of Tibet. She has also conducted meditation courses at yoga and healing centres and also with the staff of Life Positive mag. Suma Verghese, the editor at that time was a part of it. She also has a Diploma in Buddhist Studies from Mumbai University. Ever since she left Awaz-e-Niswaan due to health reasons, she been working on the reorientation of the self; writing being part of the catharsis. “Writing infuses bits of the past into the present.”

She feels she needs to seek new answers to questions oft-asked. For instance, she was asked by journalists about “how she feels” when the Supreme Court recently struck down instant Triple Talaq. She is obviously happy that the court had given a historic judgement, albeit her own case (which addressed the entire Muslim Personal Law and not just Talaq) has gone into oblivion. “Any record ruling is welcome. But it takes time to show results in women’s lives. Behavioral changes are the most difficult to execute, and not just in Muslim, but any society,” she adds, recalling her own struggle to get signatories on her petition when she was trying to strengthen her argument in the court. Kamila Tayyabji, Chairperson of WIT and Dr. Anees Sayyad, Head of History department in Mumbai University also supported her and gave their signatures on her petition. Except for a few intellectuals like actor Shabana Azmi and writer Ismat Chughtai, no one openly supported her stance. Had it not been for the moral and legal succor provided by a few friends she would not have survived the wrath she invoked by first demanding a clarity in her marital status and second uniting Muslim women in untouched pockets of Mumbai. “Individual burkha-clad Muslim women took immense risks to even attend meetings. Women did a great job of cementing relations

during the riots. I think each of these small seemingly-powerless women need to be celebrated.”

Just after she filed the petition in the Supreme Court in 1983, in 1984 an international network of Muslim feminists [Women Living under Islamic Laws] was formed to support her petition. In 1986 this network had its first conference in Lahore, Pakistan. She and Rashida Muzawar from Goa attended the conference, representing India. And in 1987, Shehnaaz formed the first Muslim feminist organisation, Awaaz-e-Niswaan along with Anwari Begum and others.

Shehnaaz also shares about her friend Rashida Muzawar who also did a lot of work but did not get her due. Rashida was a law student then and as we know Goa has a uniform civil code. When Shehnaz filed her petition, the fundamentalists of Goa also joined in and asked for a repeal of the civil code of Goa and the implementation of the Muslim personal law. Rashida opposed them tooth and nail. She was beaten up whilst protesting outside the college campus. But she did not give up and through her struggle actually saved the code. She also ran a crisis centre for women.

Shehnaz feels the failures of the past should become lessons for the present, not solely in the context of the women’s movement. She feels any feminist ideology is not enough to bind women. “Indian feminist groups, mostly the left-liberal blocs, need to do a serious stocktaking of the achievements so far. Seldom are groups ready for reflection, they are fiercely into the ‘do-do-do’ mode,” she states the momentum of the eighties can be restored if women see the reason to step back and reflect and strategize better. “Times are changing. Everyone in the administration seems to be

fully agreeable on women's rights. The climate seems so favorable, and the policies so conducive. But why is it that excesses against women continue?" she stresses the need to dissect the political correctness surrounding the pro-women rhetoric.

If there is one area where women's groups lack the most, in Shahnaz's eyes, it is their failure to address matters of faith. Religious faith is a huge binding factor in India, it provides the core for many movements which advocated social reform. "Why is it that such reform movements – be it Sufi, Buddhist, Sikh or the Bhagwat Dharm of Maharashtra – could hold on to the masses despite their radical thought? They were not labelled elitist, but feminist groups are easily misunderstood? Why do well-meaning women's organizations become targets of hatred? Why are they termed 'Western' while Saint Dyaneshwar (who also spoke of human equality) is embraced?" she questions. Women's movement needs to factor in a more organic and inclusive approach, which takes into account the inner healing that women (and people in general) are seeking. She says India has been home to many spiritually healing forces – ranging from Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti to the more recent Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan. "By being more open to the definition of religious faith, we can stop playing into the hands of fundamentalist forces. We can't be fundamental while dealing with fundamentalism." That is shooing away the inner demons before ousting the outer ones!

This article was written first by Sumedha Raikar-Mhatre in *Punha Stree Uvach*

Small changes have been made to suit the context of the book



PERSONAL STORIES



BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO BMMA LEADERS



Before the readers embark on reading the personal journeys of each leader, here is a brief recapitulation of what binds them together, their differences and commonalities in a nutshell.

Let's begin with their states. Safia Akhtar is from Madhya Pradesh, Nishat Hussein from Rajasthan, Khatoon Shaikh from Maharashtra, Naseem Shaikh and Noorjahan Diwan from Gujarat, Nasreen Metai from Karnataka, Jeibunnisa R from Tamil Nadu, Rahima Khatoon from West Bengal, Farhat Amin from Odisha, Niyazmeen from Delhi, Zakia Soman from Gujarat and Noorjehan Safia Niaz from Maharashtra.

Trigger

Nishat, Khatoon, Noorjehan, Zakia, Noorjehan Dewan and Naseem were directly impacted by the riots of 1989, 1992 and 2002 respectively and it also proved to be a trigger for their entry into activism. They saw the community despondency and vulnerability from close quarters, they suffered themselves in many different

ways and lastly and most importantly, they saw Muslim women's susceptibility and marginalization within and outside the community. In many ways, these riots played a pivotal role in allowing these women to emerge as leaders. Rahima had legacy of her father. He already had an NGO and he further helped her start her own. Farhat was pushed into activism by a stinging remark by a funding agency which asked her, if not she then who will lead the Muslim women? Jeibunnisa was impacted by a natural calamity, tsunami which pushed her into working for the affected and exposed her to their vulnerabilities. Safia was part of a communist party trade union which led to organizing women and later Muslim women when she joined BMMA. Niyazmeen's mother was part of a self-help group and was regularly attending programmes organized by them. She was influenced by the community organiser of the NGO and decided that activism is what she wants to do. Nasreen like Niyazmeen was also influenced by the training and exposure programmes of her NGO which pulled her into activism. Mariya always had a sense of comfort working with women and as someone having the privilege of education felt that it is her responsibility to support and be of use to those who need it.

Children

Their children have all done well for themselves and most are on their way to higher education. Jeibunnisa, Rahima, Noorjahan, Farhat's children are studying MBA, IT, medicine and other contemporary subjects. Safia and Nishat's children are well placed in formal sector employment. Naseem's and Khatoon's children are

married and settled and following informal/semi-formal employments. Nasreen and Niyazmeen's children are small, yet to go to school.

Education

BMMA leadership is high on education. Rahima and Nishat are trained teachers, both having done their B.Ed. Nasreen is also a trained teacher, having done her M.Ed. Safia is MA in Urdu, Niyazmeen is MA in Social Work, and Jeibunnisa is MA in Sociology and a diploma holder in civil engineering. Mariya is a graduate in political science and a double post graduate in human rights from Kolkata University and SOAS, London. Naseem was not able to enter college and Khatoon did her 12th class after being an established activist. Farhat was and is into journalism, wrote for top, prominent papers. She still writes as a freelancer. Safia taught in school and later was a lecturer in college. Noorjahan could only finish her first year BA. She knew stenography and worked as a computer operator.

Family Support

Interestingly, Rahima, Niyazmeen, Jeibunnisa, Farhat and Nasreen's husbands are also activists. That makes their work easy. Nishat, Safia had arranged marriages into families which whole heartedly supported their work. Noorjahan, Naseem and Khatoon had to struggle, negotiate, cajole to get support from their husbands. And they managed well.

Family support is a given in their families. Most got it easily, and some like Khatoon, Noorjahan, Naseem and

Jeibunnisa had to struggle to get it. One thing common in the parents of these leaders was the passion of, one or both, for educating their daughters. Rahima, Safia, Khatoon, Noorjahan, Nasreen, Nishat, Farhat's mothers were all home makers with passion for education. Jeibunnisa's mother was a teacher, Niyazmeen's was an active community worker and also did petty piece work at home. Naseem's mother was into family business with her husband. Noorjahan's mother, uneducated, stitched quilts during the night and sold them during the day. Nasreen's mothers had small food vending business of making dosa.

There was some financial stability in Farhat, Jeibunnisa's family as their fathers were into government service. Rest had informal sources of income. Rahima's father worked in a sugar factory, Naseem's parents had business of making mitti utensils, Khatoon's father worked in an oil shop as a daily wage earner, Nishat's father was a tailor. Safia's mother did stitching and odd jobs as a widow to manage her children with limited support. Noorjahan's father was uneducated but worked hard as a fruit seller to educate his children. Niyasmeen's father is a tailor and Nasreen's father would vend sweetmeats and sugarcane juice.

Politics

Noorjahan Diwan was at the verge of fighting the local elections but was not nominated at the last moment. She is the one who has come closest to being in the system. Jeibunnisa and Safia have been close to the communist party. Jeibunnisa has attended many of their training programmes and Safia was the president

of their anganwadi trade union. Farhat is not interested in entering the political arena precisely because she has seen it from such close quarters. Her father and brother in law have been active politically but she refused to take the plunge. Ditto for Nasreen, Mariya and Naseem who think politics is not for them. Niyazmeen, Khatoon and Rahima are ambivalent. They were keen on entering politics but they also realized that it is a different ballgame.

Women Qazi

Khatoon Shaikh, Nishat Hussein, Safia Akhtar, Nasreen Metai and Jeibunnisa are trained qazi. They are part of the first batch of 15 which studied from the all-women Darul Uloom-e-Niswan, a registered organization which imparts socio-religious training to Muslim women. This organization was specifically formed to formally induct women into training in religious affairs. After 2-year long training on their responsibilities as qazi these five women set the record. In all 15 BMMA members in the first batch and 6 women in the second batch in Mumbai have become qazis. Zakia and Noorjehan have worked to develop the syllabus and the trainings for qazis and hence have certified each other for the same.

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FARHAT AMIN ODISHA



About Family

Farhat Amin was born at Cuttack into the Diwan family of Dhenkanal (a former princely state in Odisha). Her great grandfather, Mohammed Atharuddin Mirza Nimatullahi was the ruling chief of Kamakhyangar and the diwan to king of Dhenkanal and a direct descendant of Shah Nimatullahi Wali. With her grandfather Sayeed Mohammed (a freedom fighter and the founder of Sayeed Seminary, the second nationalist school in Odisha) joining the nationalist movement, the family has always been actively involved in politics, social work and social upliftment of the Muslim community. Her grandmother Begum Badrunnisa Akhtar (the youngest granddaughter of the famous social reformer Ubaidullah Al-Ubaidi Suhrawardy) was again a social revolutionary. She in the 1920's had encouraged Muslim girls to give up purdah and had made sure that they got themselves educated in the girls school at Cuttack.

Farhat was born the youngest in her family. Her sister is elder to her by 13 years and her other paternal cousins were even more senior and thus she was always treated like a child. Growing up, Farhat had closely watched her father, Afzal-ul Amin working for the community, Afzal-ul was the Vice-chairman of Cuttack Municipality, the chairperson of Odisha board of Wakfs and the founder of a few UP Urdu Medium School at Cuttack. He was encouraging and used to take Farhat along with him to his meetings. But her mother, Syeda Roshanara Akhtar, who hailed from the same Suhrawardy family as Farhat's grandmother did, was quite strict and conservative.

In one instance, Farhat expressed her desire to ride a bicycle. But her mother did not approve of this, she asked her father to buy her a pair of golden earrings instead. But Farhat was stubborn, so after school she would take her friend's cycle and ride it in the school playground. Once during lunch break she rode her friend's cycle to go home. Her mother got extremely furious at this, Farhat was sent to school back in a rickshaw and another person was asked to take back the cycle. Half way she took back the cycle from him and rode to school in that cycle so that she won't be ridiculed by her friends. It was her determination which helped her learn cycle and later bike.

Farhat bonded very well with her father, but it was only after his death, she realised his vast contribution for the social upliftment of the community, which again inspired her to do the same. She narrates an incident, when she was in class 2 and was out with her father. She insisted on buying an ice cream. He said that he did not have change. After sometime a girl came and stood quietly. Her father noticed her and went to a nearby shop, brought the change immediately handed over some money. Little Farhat got really angry at this, she complained to her mother. Later she came to know that the girl's father was in jail. And Farhat's father helped them financially. She came to know this later and realized her mistake.

Once she took a rickshaw and when the rickshaw driver came to know who she was, he refused to take money from her, when she asked why, he told her that "It is your father who helped me buy this rickshaw, how can I take money from you?" This also she came to know after his death. Freedom fighters like Rambha

Devi, Biren Mitra Pattnaik, including the former Chief minister of Odisha, Biju Patnaik, Odisha's first woman chief minister, Nandani Satpathy would come to her house, during natural calamities like the floods and during political crisis in the state to lay out plans. Her family was in the forefront of relief activity.

Work Information

Farhat began her career as a journalist. She started with Hindustan Times and then moved to Times of India and then later wrote for almost all newspapers and magazines in her state. She would also do report and documentation work for funding agencies. A funding agency asked her to edit a report on a women's empowerment program. After the editing was done, she gave her own opinion on it. In her opinion she mentioned that Muslim women are more marginalized and have their own set of problems, they are marginalized within and outside. There must be special programmes only for Muslim women because in general programmes, the benefits do not reach them. One fine day she got a call from that funding agency. They asked her to explain her opinion on Muslim women and asked that if they focused only on Muslim women, then won't it be construed as communal? She explained that if they look at the issue from a communication perspective then this community needs to be reached out in Urdu language, as not all of its members are familiar with Odiya language. Also we may speak the language of the constitution but a Muslim woman's life is governed also by the shariat. That needs to be looked into. So the funding agency asked if she would like to work with Muslim women.

At that time Farhat did not have a good opinion of the NGOs. So she refused saying that she is happy with journalism. At which the funding agency person said if you being a Muslim woman, yourself will not work for other Muslim women, then who do you think will come from heaven and do the job? That struck her and she kept thinking about it, it kept ringing in her ears, she was disturbed. She thought that with this journalism work, she is getting a good paycheck and a cozy life. And that's it. But in reality it is important to reach out to Muslim women. Around this time she got a media scholarship from UK to work on violence against women. Through which she met victims, did meetings, met many Muslim women. In many places after meeting, Muslim women would come up to her and ask why being a Muslim she is not doing anything for them? She asked them what is it that needs to be done. They narrated their issues and problems. This was a second eye opening and she got an idea of what Muslim women were going through. She could sense the restriction and the special difficulties. This pushed her into working with Muslim women. She started doing awareness programmes with Muslim women. After some time she did a national programme on Muslim women in which she called women from different states. As part of that programme, a silent march protesting against violence against women was organized. This was well covered by media. Men were criticizing saying that she was misleading women.

With this meeting, lot of funding agency reached out to her. Till that time, nobody was focusing on Muslim women. There were many women's organization headed by Muslim men and women, but they would not focus on Muslim women but would clichédly say, we work

for all. Whereas Farhat would say, I work with women, but specifically with Muslim women. By saying we work for all, they would indirectly deem Farhat's work as communal. But that did not affect Farhat as she was focused and she continued her work with Muslim women. A lot of her friends would also label her work as communal to which she would reply that it's just a matter of perception and to understand her work for one has to move into her shoes.

This work with Muslim women was a herculean task for her as she had to convince so many about the need to have a Muslim focus. She had to sensitize stakeholders like funders, well-wishers, acquaintances. Till such time that she started working with Muslim women, these stakeholders had no idea about issues related to Muslim women. All they knew about Muslims was their love for biryani, the triple talaq and Muslim women being a mother of multiple children.

On the other hand Muslim women too were unaware. When she went in the community and asked women about how many of them are married, 80% hands would go up. And then she would ask if they had read and signed the nikahnama? All would deny and some would in turn ask her, what is a nikahnama? They only just signed where they were asked to. She would then ask them; do you go to bank, offices and just sign wherever you are asked to? They said no. Then she would explain, then how come do you just contract away your entire life without even reading the contract documents? She, in her training, would address these small issues and explain their rights to community women. She could also see there was difference in learning and reception between urban and rural Muslim

women. She realized that IEC material is of no use to women who were not literate or who did not know Urdu also. So she decided to use puppets for awareness programmes. A puppet team was formed. Before the puppet team, Muslim girls group themselves did the awareness programme. It was a big hit. They would do programmes in the afternoon with women. But soon women complained that girls are openly performing in the communities and that will affect their marriage prospects. That's how the puppet team was formed where the girls performed behind the curtain and the puppets were in the forefront.

She would also call funders to her programmes. They asked her to start project work. She did not have a registered organization then. So she worked under the fellowship programme. She had no intention to work long term as an activist so she was not prepared for it. So she started to receive funds through the Odisha chapter of a Delhi based organization.

She always did rights based work whether it was entitlements, PDS or health. She was never into distribution of zakat or doing philanthropic work. Around this time was the fortnightly VAW (Violence Against Women) programme. With permission from the masjid authorities the program was to be done in the masjid premises, in the library. She asked them if they could say namaz, he said yes, they could enter the masjid through another door and do namaz in the library of the mosque. This happened in 2006. Earlier, she had been to Dhaka and had said namaz in a mosque and since then she was keen on doing the same in Odisha. As she would do with all programs, before this program too she informed the local police station.

Her journalist friends picked it up and it was all over the media. 'Muslim women are entering the mosque'. Around 100 women who finished the training were ready for offering namaz in the mosque. The mosque authorities allowed only 5 women, which women refused and did namaz under the shamiana in the meeting venue itself. She told the media that they were not offering namaz in the mosque because they were more in number and would not fit in the library. But the journalists met the mosque head and he developed cold feet and backed out saying I don't know these women and I did not give permission to anyone for namaz inside the mosque. That became a big issue. Fatwa was passed against her. This is the price that one pays for doing rights based work. The Delhi based organization did not like it. She was asked to seek forgiveness. She refused saying is it crime to ask women to say namaz in the mosque? If at all she would seek forgiveness it is from Allah. A lot of people spoke to her brother in law. He informed them that she was invited and hence she went there. He also told them, that Farhat's great grandfather had built a masjid. If she had wanted she could have gone in that masjid, why would she opt for some other masjid? She went there because she was invited. That was the day she decided that she would start her organization and not depend on others. Thus she got her own organization Bold Initiative Research & Documentation (BIRD) registered in 2008.

Values and Beliefs

Honesty and integrity, because she says she is answerable to Allah. Her objective in life is to teach fishing and not distribute fish.

Biggest Achievement and Biggest Failures

She is happy to see her girls, who were groomed by her, fighting their own battles and winning. When they say, “whatever I am is because of Farhatapa”, that is the biggest Bharat Ratna she could ever ask for. Her aim has always been to help them fight their own battles. There are many young women who have successfully completed their higher studies, doing jobs, their businesses and are financially independent. On the contrary there are also many girls who succumb to patriarchal pressure and are unable to exercise their Sharia and Constitutional rights despite all the capacity building exercises. She says, ‘this hurts me and leaves me pondering, where did I fail?’

The five issues of BMMA are the five pillars of her life. Whatever time she gets, she is dedicating to these 5 issues, either making women financially independent, or making them aware of their rights, reaching out to the police in case of emergency. She operates from home and at the end of the day she is happy that she was able to bring smile on someone’s face.

She thinks of BMMA as her other child. At this crossroads of life she has to look after family, and her son is also at a threshold of his academic career. Her mother and sister are not well and she is fully preoccupied with family responsibilities. The girls in her team are also married. She is feeling hallow. She wants to do so much, but cannot do. How to do it with so much of family responsibilities?

Family

Before she became an activist, she was a journalist and even as a journalist her work was difficult. While covering cases, she had to speak up against the police at times. Once she was following up on chief justices daughter-in-law's case. And her mother put her foot down. She told her that without her father around, she is not in a position to take too much risk. So she was not able to take up many such challenging cases, but she did manage to do a lot of good work as a journalist. Farhat later got married and had to leave her work as she stayed in a small hill town, Coorg in Karnataka. In about one and half years of marriage her husband passed away. He worked in Kalahandi with tribals, which was prone to malaria. On the day of the Rath Yatra, he became very ill. There was no transport to take him to the hospital and he died an untimely death. She was in Cuttack with her small son when this happened. She had to join back work but going back to journalism was not easy with a small child and also night job was not possible for her. So she took up a contractual teachers job. And also started freelancing.

She did not take her widowhood as a drawback. When widows would come to her for help citing their widowhood she would encourage them by saying that widowhood should not become a hurdle. How can I help you if I am also a widow? Do not think of yourself as a victim just because you are a widow. She used her widowhood as a shield to empower other women. Widowhood is not equal to being a victim. If I can do it, you can also do it. I am a widow and I have a small child. Life is not easy for me but if I can live, why can't you?

Her son supports her in her endeavours. He makes documentary films on social issues related to women. He is currently doing his master's in psychology and wants to help the society at large.

Income and Spending Decisions

She is financially independent. It gives her a sense of empowerment. It is a great feeling to spend as per ones own wishes and fulfil the dreams of others. In her family every grain of work is honoured as contribution of the individual towards the growth of the family because in her family everybody thinks democratically. She does not have a property in her name on purpose. She feels its an added responsibility to take care of and then be accountable for it. She feels her sole property should be her *aamaal* [good deeds] which is permanent.

Inner Being

She did not know the answer as to why she was born till came to know the meaning of name. It was late in life when she learnt that her name means "giving happiness to others". Since then she has made this the purpose of her life. It gives her a lot of satisfaction in spreading happiness.

After she is dead and gone she simply wishes that when she is remembered people have a smile on their lips. She hopes and wishes that Allah grants this wish for her.

Good, witty and healthy humor brings a smile on her face and the music that hits her heart makes her cry. On hard days what makes her get up and go about your

work is her firm faith in God that inspires her to explore success beyond her failure and fear to lose. In times of crisis, earlier she would lose her cool and blame others but now she introspects and tries to rectify herself. The moments that she is scared of are the moments when she is totally unaware or ignorant about something she is scared to confront and face the unexpected consequences. She believes pride is not a virtue but she does feel good about the proud moments in her life, like having achieved what she aimed for or people recognizing her humble efforts etc.

Leadership

Her strength comes from her communication skills. She has done MA in English literature. She has also done diploma in mass communication, diploma in cartooning, PG diploma in Ecology and Environment. Basically have been a student throughout.

She gives lot of importance to communication skills. She believes that it gives us an edge. She says we must know the skills of keeping our thoughts across the table. We get angry easily because of which we ruin our chances of establishing a good relationship.

She is demotivated when someone lies to her. Then she thinks, that may be that's who she or he is. It should not affect her at all. She leaves it to God. There are a lot of people in the community, you do so much for them and then they say, what did you do for us? Then she feels demotivated. They even refuse to recognize her. She leaves it to God, saying she did what she did to the best of her ability and His knowledge.

The toughest decision has been to close down the activities of the organization. There was also funding for work but she returned the money, as she was too involved with the responsibility of looking after her immediate family.

She was inspired by the co-founder members Noorjehan and Zakia. In Rajasthan, BMMA's national meeting was held in the musafirkhana. They all went to a hotel for dinner. Farhat saw that Noorjehan was at the gate of the hotel and was paying each and every auto driver from her wallet. These autos had ferried the BMMA members from the musafikhana to the hotel. That was a turning point for Farhat. She said if she can do it, why can't I do a bit more. Another incident Farhat shares. She has worked with many funding agency, and have met a lot of top-notch women leaders, but the way Zakia treats every woman irrespective of their knowledge and status is exemplary. Their leadership has inspired her.

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**QAZI JEIBUNNISA
RIYAZ
TAMIL NADU**



Jeibunnisa is from Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu, a southern state of India. She stays with her husband and two sons. Earlier, after marriage, she stayed in a joint family. It was only after her in laws passed away that they started to stay as a nuclear family. Her son has done his MBA and is working now. Second son is studying in the second year of medicine. Her husband holds a diploma in mechanical engineering and a postgraduate in Sociology. Jeibunnisa is a diploma holder in civil engineering and a postgraduate in Sociology as well. Her mother was a teacher and her father in a government service. She has 3 brothers and two sisters and one of the brothers is a doctor.

Her parents were very liberal but after marriage there were too many restrictions on her by her in laws. In fact till her first son was born, she did not even leave her house. They were conservative and traditional and did not believe in women's freedom and choice. But around that time her husband's company got locked down. So she requested him to allow her to work in an NGO. She joined an organization and did documentation work for them. Around that time, she also started to read the works of Periyar, read the Indian constitution and understood concepts like socialism.

In 2004, the east coast of the country was ravaged by tsunami. This created an opportunity for her to work for the most disadvantaged. She worked in the worse affected areas. Her husband also joined her. He started to understand her work, accompanied her to meetings and programmes and with time realized the importance of what she was doing. At one point in time he would not even let her leave the door of the house, but now he stands as her biggest supporter and ally.

Post tsunami she also reached out to her family to raise donations for the affected people. Her in laws also helped her and that was the turning point for getting their support as well. That's how she entered full-fledged in social activism. They were proud to see her leading meetings, she appeared in the newspaper and even TV and that made them realize that she is doing good work. Her work influenced her family as well as they too realized the importance of education and women's empowerment.

Challenges

She was like any other girl; did not think much about what future will hold for her. She married at the age of 18. Change in her life came because of the changed circumstances in her family. Her request for taking up a job was agreed to only because her husband had lost his job. She took that opportunity to chart a course for herself. She finished her studies after marriage. She underwent a major shift personally also.

She belonged to a liberal family and got married into a conservative family and that posed the biggest challenge. It was a love marriage. As said earlier, her in laws would not even allow her to cross the door of the house. 'I was allowed to go out with them only'. In a year she would leave her house only 2-3 times. She had to lie sometimes to go out with her husband. Even after the child was born she was not allowed to leave her house. She left her house first time when the child was admitted in school, in lower KG. She had to cry and fight to leave the house. She was not allowed to talk to anyone, meet anyone. Every time she wanted to leave the house, she

had to fight and cry. Gradually, as we saw in the previous paragraph, as her in laws realized that she is doing good work, they left their grip on her. But for a very long time she had to struggle for her basic right to be free. All that she did was possible only because her husband took a decision to stand by her. Her activism, her education was possible because he stood with her. Although, that also took some time and negotiating.

Work Information

After part of being BMMA she has got the space and the opportunity to go out in the world, to understand herself, understand Islam and understand the difficulties faced by women. She got exposure to what is happening to women in other states, to understand the oppression in which women live. She understood women's rights as per the constitution. She understood what Islam provides for women, her rights within Islam. Ordinary people have no idea about this. They don't even know what is there in the Quran. Most people don't read and others who read don't understand what is written. Parallel to her own growth and learning was the growth, which she manifested in the community. As she taught women about her rights she also understood that for herself. Her family too on the side understood the importance of education. They got space to come out of their homes. With BMMA's intervention in the communities, more and more Muslim women started to enter the public space. During the anti-CAA protest too, Muslim women took the lead. All this was possible because of BMMA's regular inputs, education, training and capacity building. She is currently heading her own

organization, Manitham Trust and is also the BMMA state convener of Tamil Nadu.

Achievement

Her biggest achievement has been to be able to make space amidst the community. Her biggest achievement has also been that through her work she has empowered atleast 3000 families for livelihood training, income generation training and facilitating their financial independence. She has been able to reach out to atleast 10000 women for rights based training. Atleast 100 women leaders have emerged over the last so many years who are in turn are leading the community. Her work has impacted not just Muslim women. She has been part of many children's forum, women's forum and has contributed to their growth through her training programmes.

Challenges

Her moments of frustration are when she is not able to wear off the influence of the jamaat on the community. Jamaat are male religious conservative groups who misinform the community about religion and also support anti-women beliefs and practices. Her frustration is to counter the influence of these groups. Once the jamaat gives information, which is false, it is difficult to counter it with the truth. People just blindly trust them. All her efforts go waste when what she says is countered by the jamaat and people believe more in them than her, even though what she is talks is the language of justice and equality. But that cuts no ice

with the community. The community internalizes what jamaat says.

Family Support

Support from marital family as we saw earlier did not come easy. She had to fight for it. Earlier she would leave for work even without informing her inlaws and would come back by 5 pm and they would not even know that she has gone for work. There was resistance from her brother and sister in laws as well. But today they all support her in her work of social reform and development. Her husband today looks after the administration of Manitham Trust. He supports her financially also. Any good news is first shared with her. In times of crisis all stand with her.

Income and Spending Decisions

Her husband was a manager in a private firm and later worked in her NGO. He also worked for a while in the government. She also has some income from her NGO; her son has started to work now. Her family also supports her. So she is comfortable financially. Earlier she was not even in a position to decide as she was completely under the scanner of her in-laws. But as time has gone by, she takes all financial decisions. Her house is in her name given to her by her parents. There is also a flat of her own. There was a time when she was completely dependent on her marital family for money. She would not even have a rupee on her to make a phone call. So she understands how important it is for women to be financially independent.

Leadership

As a leader she possesses many qualities. She can speak well and express herself in public meetings. She can comment on various issues and hold an opinion. She writes poetry and articles on issues in her state language. Her other more important quality as a leader is her innate love for people. She believes all are equal and discrimination amongst people is not a done thing. No matter what, she always maintains a positive attitude. She does not let circumstances pull her down. She explains herself to people if she has an opinion different from others.

Lack of resources demotivate her. To work with people and to address issues requires resources. She feels her fund-raising skills are not good enough right now and she must work on it. She also feels that she belongs to that breed of people who don't publicize their work. But in this day and age it is very crucial to market your work and let the world know what you do.

The toughest decision of her life has been to start to work. Earlier on in her marriage, her in laws did not let her even step out of the house. She had to take a decision and leave her home, which she did and she did it successfully.

When she started the Women's Shariah Court, she was a little apprehensive about what will the society say, what will the jamaat say. But with time the acceptance increased steadily. Today she does not work closely with the jamaat but they do some collaboration on cases. If the woman comes to her and the husband goes to the jamaat, the jamaat representative accompanies the

husband. At such times they mutually agree to resolve the case as going to the police will only make things complicated.

To enhance her leadership skills, she believes she must increase her knowledge base. She also must work on her fund-raising skills. She feels she must work in joint forums with women from other communities especially on the issues of communalization. After the corona pandemic it will be crucial to work on livelihood issues for which a collaborative approach will be crucial.

In her personal style of leadership, she must learn to boldly express her opinion for which she will have to increase her knowledge base, read more, understand more and grow more.

She motivates her team by continuously providing training on law, on Quranic rights and other legal rights. She also taught them tailoring, computers, jewelry making, also registered them under the labour department, helped them access government schemes.

The biggest risk that she took in her life was when she had to leave the house for work. Now her husband supports her but there was a time when she would be late at work and he would ask her to leave her job. He would insist that she wears burkha on her way to and from office. If he would see her without burkha he would fight with her for the next 2–3 days. According to her it was not a good idea to wear a burkha and work especially when one is working with other communities. It would also affect how others perceive her in the organization. Burkha would immediately put her in a secondary position. This constant conflict with family was big

challenge and a risk. How to maintain one's identity as expected by the family and also reach out to the larger community beyond Muslims? Challenge was also, like all other women face; manage the house as well as the work. When she joined BMMA it required her to travel at odd hours and to different places. She would be scared of travelling alone at times. There was also criticism, especially because she was a Muslim, that she is going out, working late, travelling so much etc. Today she has crossed those barriers but at that moment of time, she kept taking the risk of making her husband and family unhappy.

Inner Being

Do something for the society and contribute to making it a better place – seems to be her mantra. In her childhood it was clear in her head that all must stay happy and peaceful. Everyone must love and support each other. Although she was not clear that she would take up activism but she knew how the society should function. She always felt that as a person it is our responsibility to bring about better changes in the society.

She wants to be remembered as a person who helped children to study, who helped women to acquire social skills and livelihood skills, who provided legal aid and counseling, who helped women develop a positive attitude and one who gave knowledge.

She feels happy and satisfied that not only did she help others but also grew as a person. She was able to meet so many people within the country and even in other countries.

How much a girl has to go through after marriage, the difficulties that she has to face – when she thinks of that, when she thinks of her own difficulties she cries. After marriage, her parents, her brother did not talk to her. Even during her pregnancy and delivery they did not visit her. That still hurts and makes her cry.

She is inherently a positive person so in times of crisis, she gets a little shaken initially but eventually she pushes herself and has a positive self-talk and motivates herself and starts working on the strategies.

She is slightly scared when she has to travel alone or when she has to travel at odd times. Her moments of pride are with women, with BMMA members, when she is appreciated and liked by everyone. Media has also appreciated her work and helped her be known in her state. They write about her work. She was able to go to USA and present her work there.

She has also faced opposition by the larger community. She worked extensively in her state against the practice of triple divorce. She was also vocal against the restriction on women to enter sacred spaces, especially her work on the Haji Ali dargah issue. She also set up women's shariat courts as a counter to the men's shariat court. All this work invited opposition and flak. She was called unislamic. While some opposed, many also supported her and even participated in the signature campaigns that she initiated. Even men supported the triple divorce campaign. The positive support came because she highlighted the stories of women through social media, through public meetings, press hearings, publications, IEC materials and through that created a narrative focusing on gender justice.

3

**QAZI ZUBEDA
KHATOON SHAIKH
MAHARASHTRA**



Personal Information

Khatoon Shaikh is working since 1995. She has three sons and four daughters. All are married. She is a grandmother to close to a dozen grandchildren. She stays with her eldest son and his family. Her sons are in the garment business and they run a garment factory on rent. She also has a shop on rent for selling dresses.

Her mother passed away when she was 10 years of age. Her father was from Gujrat, Bhavnagar. Her mother was a Christian who converted to Islam on marriage. Khatoon has one brother and one sister from her first mother. After her death her father married another woman. And from then on, problems in Khatoon's life started.

Her father was working in an oil shop as a daily worker. She could not study more than class 7 but later as an activist she took admission in the SNDT Women's University and completed her class 12. She was the senior most in the class and inspired many to take up education again.

Her husband passed away in 2004. Her work as an activist started with her own family when her sister in law; husband's sister, was troubled by her husband. That was the trigger, which led her into the world of activism. She supported her sister in law and because of that others in the family also realized that they could do something for the betterment of the society. She took help from Special Cell for Women and through her reached Anjuman-e-Islam where she met Noorjehan. Their association continues for 25 long years and they still work together in BMMA.

She works as the state convener of BMMA in Maharashtra. She is also the trustee and founder member of Ashana Trust.

Influencers

She had to leave school after class 7, which at that time was considered as the final year of school. She was very keen on studying further but could never finish her education as she was expected to look after her younger siblings. She studied in Imamwada Municipal School. Inspite of a difficult childhood, she was open to learning from her father who always had a charitable and philanthropic approach. Her father always supported other people, helped them. There were always people coming at the door to seek his help and intervention. It is his nature of helping others that inspired her.

She used to read Khatoon-e-Mashriq, a women's magazine. She was impressed by the stories about women going into space etc. and would always wonder what can a woman like her do who is not even allowed to leave her home and who is without any substantial education. Little did she know that she would be doing such phenomenal work later.

After marriage she found her own way and she pursued her ambition and dreams. She spoke to her husband and her father in law and with their support she embarked on the journey of social reform and change. She also encouraged women from her society to join her. Even before the formal group of *mahila mandal* [women's group] was formed, she was a firebrand and would solve issues in her *chawl*. She would reach out and

solve petty fights. Even if people came home to fight with her or her sisters, she would ask them to come inside and have a dialogue. Her stepsister was very aggressive but she would handle her as well with love and understanding. Her step mom would appreciate her for her understanding. Her step mom and father had three more children, but she never discriminated between her real and step siblings.

After joining the *mahila mandal*, her perspective changed. She gained confidence in her own self, she realized that inspite of lack of formal education, it is possible to help and support others. She would get intimidated by how the educated would talk, wear good clothes, stay in good homes, speak good English. But when she got training, she realized that she is no less. People would tell her that inspite of her lack of formal education she knows more than any educated person. Life's experiences teach what no school or college can teach. But she did not rest there. She completed her 12th class through SNDT Women's University through distance education department. She is grateful to Dr. Chandrakant Puri, who was heading the department then and who encouraged her to study further. Through him, she introduced Door Step Education in Navpada and Behrampada communities where many women got enrolled in higher education. She is grateful to many people for encouraging and supporting her.

She is a great learner and sees education in every interaction she has with people. She reaches out and builds a person to person connect. She allows herself to learn from every situation, every interaction, every case – a person like her influences and gets influenced and learns from every situation to grow.

Work Information

She implements the vision of BMMA in the state of Maharashtra. She runs the Aurton Ki Shariat Adalat or the Women's Shariat Court, which provides legal aid to women. She coordinates women area leaders to do advocacy for better health care, better educational facilities and for better infrastructure from the government. She has been in the forefront of the struggle to abolish triple divorce and has held many conferences and public hearings to advocate for the same. She has coordinated activities with young people through her volunteers. In short encouraged and facilitated the leadership of Muslim women through various activities and initiatives.

Values

She believes in honesty, does not like to be lied to. She is also very punctual and a stickler for time. A lot of things changed for her in her life. As a young woman she stayed in a city, in a good locality and after marriage she came to stay in a slum community. A lot changed for her, her life, her perspectives, and her standard of living. Once she joined an organization to do activism, she decided to change her herself, her style of working and her time management skills got enhanced. She started to go out of her house with a purpose. She got immense trust and support from the various organizations that she worked with. They trusted her and her work in the communities. She was even more particular about accounts. Even today she maintains a daily account of what is the income and how it is expended. Dedication, commitment, punctuality, honesty, integrity – these are time tested values which any leader must possess.

Achievements and Failures

Her biggest achievement has been the Haji Ali dargah judgment. She felt hurt and angry that she could not go into the dargah to which she has been visiting since her childhood. She advocated for the issue with the minority commission and other government authorities. But when nobody helped, BMMA decided to go to the Mumbai High Court. It was also awe inspiring for her to visit the High Court, as she had never gone there earlier. She felt inspired and empowered that she is fighting a big case in such a big institution. She would worry and be anxious about how the case will eventually end. But BMMA won the case in the High Court as well as the Supreme Court. She says she cannot define how happy she was. On the day when women entered the dargah after the Supreme Court judgment was the best day in her life. There was bus full of women, BMMA volunteers from across the country who entered the dargah with full police protection. Now also when she visits the Haji Ali dargah she is proud that women are now again able to enter the sanctum.

She was questioned by a lot by people, even people from civil society organizations, asking her why is she even working on this issue. Women should not be going into dargahs anyway, why are you even fighting on such an issue? But she says they will never understand what it means to be denied into a space just because one is a woman and what it means to wage a battle against the prohibition and win it.

Another achievement that she is extremely proud of was the legislation against triple divorce. She says we never study the Quran, we never read its meaning

and thus we never knew about our rights enshrined in it. She started reading the Quran in Hindi and Urdu to understand her rights and to be able to answer the regressive forces who did not want any legislation against the practice. She fought with her son as well. She explained to her son that they wanted the Quranic method of divorce, which is the Ahsan method where there is scope for reconciliation and arbitration.

She was in Supreme Court when the judgment against triple divorce came. She was happy that she was able to experience that moment in her life when a historic judgment was passed against the practice. Because of BMMA's work around the issue, the community was able to see the Supreme Court judgment as well as the legislation against the practice. After 2019, cases of one-sided divorce have reduced. Men are coming forward to apply for divorce or reconciliation instead of just divorcing their wives instantly. That change for her is very satisfying. She now supports women who have filed cases under the new law.

Failures don't exist according to her. She can see only achievements and good that has happened to her and her movement. She is fighting battles for the distressed women with the maulanas, maulvis with knowledge. And as a result, qazis themselves are sending cases to her. Women have now become qazis and can solemnize marriages. She is also the member of Darul Uloom-e-Niswan, which gave her the training and certification in becoming a qazi. As a qazi she has undertaken one khula and one mubarah divorces. So, she asks 'where is the failure? We are only moving ahead, going the right way, doing the right thing.'

Family Support

Initially family did not really support; she had to ask for it. When she started working as an activist, she had 7 children and to adjust with them and do the work was not easy. There was nobody in the house, who would help her. But because she was so committed to the work, that she would do everything in the house, cook, clean, send children to school; and then leave the house for work. She never neglected her family, or her commitment to her children. Her husband was supportive in as much as he asked her to do everything in the house first, and then she is free to go anywhere. Her husband was a rickshaw driver. He would come home in the afternoon and take his food and then she would reach by evening. That is how she managed. Even today she advises young activists to manage both the fronts with responsibility. Her eldest son would support her, help her cook and clean. And once her children grew up, her responsibility towards them also reduced. Her daughters took on the responsibility. They also learned in the process. One daughter is an activist herself and one daughter taught in the balwadi. One daughter managed to finish her 13th class. She got a lot of support as they grew up. Through her work she was able to get loan for her husband to get an auto rickshaw. She helped many families stand on their feet by providing loans to them. She also was instrumental in getting educational scholarship for poor students. She also provided medical aid to poor families through medical trusts. All the work that she did helped her gradually to gain the support of the family.

Husband supported him but he was also violent at times. Other people's comments would sway him.

He never liked it when people recognized him through her. His friends also provoked him against her working outside and he would come home and create problems for her. Then after his mood would settle, he would let her work again. So, the support did not come easy. She had to demand it, negotiate for it and take it forcibly. She had to cajole and cajole him at times. After some time, she made him do the paraprofessional social work course. That really opened his eyes and he then on, wholeheartedly supported her. She would take him everywhere with her. He would be constantly worried; whom is she meeting, does she have male friends, where is she going? There was an element of suspicion but she handled that with dignity and smartness. She also did not want the fight to go out of the house. She did not want people to say, how can she help us resolve our fight, when she herself is fighting with her husband. By taking him along with her, he was made to understand the importance of her work. He started to trust her more, and with time even encouraged her to go ahead and do her best. He started giving her suggestions and fought for her with the larger society. In fact, a few days before he passed away, he made her promise him that she would never leave her work.

When the triple divorce judgment happened, she faced a backlash from within the family through her son, who said that if she did not leave this work, he will leave the house. That was the time when she really opened up with her family and shared with them her troubles and travails and what difficulties she faced in life to be able to do the work that she is doing. She placed it before them. And told them that this [triple divorce] can happen to her daughters and her granddaughters. Somebody must raise a voice against it.

And today one can see the change in the attitude of men. Today they think twice before pronouncing divorce to their wives and that is what her contribution is. Earlier too, she was told to leave this work as that might hamper her daughter's marriage into a good house. But she did not budge and said that if she continues in this work then her daughters will get good men in their lives who would really love and care for them. She did not hide her work from anyone and with pride shared her work with everyone in the larger family. Eventually she got support from her husband and now her son-in-laws also support her. Even her son in laws at one point raised their voices against her work against triple divorce. She explained to them that they too have daughters and it will strengthen their daughters and save them from exploitation. She showed to them all the training material, the Quranic verses of *surah bakar, nisah and talaak* and how the procedure of divorce is so well given in the Quran. After that now they are convinced. She shares with them all the cases that she gets to hear every day and how men are now thinking and not instantly divorcing their wives. The law is acting as a deterrent. Men are now scared of the jail term that they may get if they instantly divorce their wife.

Today her entire family stands in support with her. Her daughters and daughter in laws care for her and support her in all crisis. Even if they fight with their husbands, they bring the complaint to her and ask her to resolve it. Her son and son in laws are fully supportive.

Income and Spending Decision

She stays with her son who has a garment business. Through her own income she manages the grocery

and her own medical and social expenses. She does not depend on him for that. She takes the decisions for her own money and he takes the decisions for his money. They don't hold each other answerable for their respective income and at the same time they collectively manage the household expenses.

She does not have her own property but owns the house of her father in law, which is now given away on rent. That house actually belongs to her 4 sisters in law and one brother in law. But they also don't demand their share because they trust her that whenever it will be sold, they will get their due share.

She believes that money is important and is the source of empowerment for women. She was able to manage her daughter's marriage and other important expenses only because she had her own income. She never had to beg before anyone. Money saves a woman's dignity. She also managed her granddaughter's marriage as well, simply because she had her own income.

Leadership

Her most important skill as a leader is that she reaches out to people with love and concern and that is what makes her popular. Even in times of pandemic she reached out to women volunteers who were no longer active. This endeared her to them. They appreciated the fact that inspite of differences, inspite of not having enough resources, she has reached out to them in times of a crisis. That is a valuable quality in a leader. Love and care is a valuable quality; keeping people together is a valuable quality.

For her self-care is crucial. She looks after her health diligently, visits the doctor, takes medicines regularly and manages her health efficiently. She tells herself that she should not stop, that she must look after herself well so that she can move around and do her work. Even after a big operation, she left house after 8 days. What prompted her to resume work was her concern about people, concern about women who approached her for help. She handles close to 150 cases every year and that does not happen just like that. It requires a lot of diligence and hard work. And that desperation to help women does not let her rest. She is always on her toes and constantly goads her team to work hard and achieve results.

She gets demotivated when there are no resources. She has a committed band of volunteers who work irrespective of any monetary benefit, but there are many more committed volunteers who would need some basic support. Also, events and programmes need funds which then she cannot organize and that really crushes her spirit. Even the decision of changing office due to lack of resources was difficult. There have been decisions regarding asking difficult team members to leave, working around negotiating with them, handling difficult situations of complying with project requirements – those have been tough times as a leader but she pulled through with her tact and honesty.

At a personal level, to be able to tell her son that she will continue to do this work was the most difficult task. He had put pressure on her to discontinue her work. Her son was part of the jamaat and was constantly under pressure from his friends asking him to pressurize his mother to leave activism. Inspite of his pressure, she

stood her ground that she will not leave her work and her commitment to women. She remembered her husband's last words who took promise from her that she will not leave this work. For her it was this promise that made her fight with her son. She shared with him how her work helped her at her most vulnerable moments when there was nobody to help her. She told her son that she is independent and happy to be alone if her work troubles him so much. He and his family are free to leave her and set up their own independent family. That was hard.

She maintains the motivation of the team by sharing with them all the difficulties that confronts the organization. She also gives them a free hand to leave the organization if they are not happy with the remuneration but they don't want to leave her or the organization because of such strong bond and emotional attachment. There are many who are very keen to do a lot of work with her and she desperately is hoping that with more funds she will be able to work together as a team.

For a community leader a good salary is crucial not just for the work that she does but also for her economic independence. At such a crucial juncture in her life, she left a well-paying job with an NGO to join a movement. That was the biggest risk that she took at a personal level as she had no idea what would joining a movement mean to her financially. The risk paid off as she joined BMMA and continued to gather achievements one after the other.

She wants to make herself a better leader by becoming a little more assertive. She wants her team to be more responsible. But she is also not comfortable being authoritative.

Inner Being

Once she was very unwell after her daughter's delivery and was bed ridden for many months. After getting better she started to cook food. A very poor woman passed her door and prayed to god that now that Khatoon has started to cook food, she will get something to eat. That she felt was the purpose of her life, to help and support the poor and the needy.

She believes that if people are basically good, then life for them as well as others is easy. She shares, she was the eldest daughter of the family. Being that her responsibility was to look after her younger siblings, adjust with everyone, be supportive to everyone. Inspite of having a stepmother, she was good to her and adjusted with her. She was good to her stepsiblings as well.

How does she want to be remembered and she laughs and says, khatoon-e-Mashriq! Or something of that sort of a name by which she would like people to remember her. She says some might remember her as someone who stood by hapless women, some might think of her as an angry woman. She wants to be remembered as women who helped other women, helped them change their lives. She wants to be remembered as someone who reached out to people in times of crisis, who arranged food and shelter, relief and compensation.

She wants people to remember her as someone who worked for the people. She remembers staying for days in the relief camp although her house was just a few meters away. Even donors came to her for relief distribution, as they trusted her completely. Hers was the only camp run by women and they were trusted more.

When she hears about funds, resources coming in she is most happy, as she knows only with resources, she will be able to reach out to more women. When a donor came forward for COVID pandemic relief, she was very happy.

When she thinks of her bad times of her past, she tears up. When she hears stories of pain and helplessness of women who come to her centre, she cries. Even during pandemic women called her for legal help. She wants to help all of them and that pushes her out of her bed. She has always been on the run, constantly wanting to resolve the cases of women who come to her. That is her purpose, to help, to reach out to vulnerable women. She prays for everyone, for the country, for the neighbours, for family and friends.

She was very scared when the police took away her son on false charges. She was very scared as she had complained against a molester and filed a FIR and to avenge that he filed a wrong complaint against her son. She ran from pillar to post, through various police stations. The police knew that he was innocent but tried to frame false charges. But the entire lane, her neighbours were with her and supported her. She is very proud of the fact that she got her son out of the police station without losing her calm. She is proud of the fact that she never bribed the police, never did anything wrong.

4

MARIYA SALIM WEST BENGAL





Personal Information

Mariya is one of the three sisters along with her paternal aunt and father. She lost her mother when she was 13 years of age. A very important member of her family whom she lost in 2018 is her grand-mother or 'Amma' as they called her. Her father is an auctioneer. Her mother completed her masters in Bio chemistry from Aligarh Muslim University and used to be a home maker. Mariya is not married yet and would like to called herself as an independent Human Rights activist.

Influencers

As a child her mother is her greatest influence. What she taught her as a child stayed with her till today. Compassion towards those who are not as privileged as us, zero food wastage, emphasis on education are some of the things that she instilled in her and her sisters through her own actions.

She had a broken family and a difficult childhood owing to personal reasons. Her mother went missing when she was only 13 and she frankly did not have an opportunity to sit and reflect or even interact with too many people, having had to manage the daily struggles that life presented to her and her sisters with at an early age. Her grandmother and her paternal aunt were two women she spent most of her teenage years with and learnt a great deal from them about resilience, sacrifice, love and respect.

In her late teens she remembers listening to her family have a conversation about a 'woman' leading a

prayer congregation in the USA. She was amazed and exhilarated. As a young girl she was always angry at the fact that only the men in her family went for Eid prayers etc. and here she was listening to them talk about a woman lead a Muslim prayer, something unheard of, actually unimaginable at the time. After a lot of difficulty, she managed to get her hands on the news piece and Amina Wadood became someone she started following closely.

She has read a few books but what has stayed with her is the Quran and the Indian Constitution.

Work Information

Mariya has worked with many regional and national organizations including ActionAid and Amnesty International India and the National Commission for nomadic, semi nomadic and denotified tribes. She has also been a mentor for minority representatives from across the globe at the OHCHR in Geneva. After having left Amnesty, having been a victim of identity-based discrimination there as a Muslim and having seen their blatant castiest behavior, she has been freelancing and has been an independent social activist. Her work revolves around working on issues concerning Muslim women in particular and the Muslim community in general. She also writes for various online portals like Al Jazeera, Wire, First Post, Newsminute etc.

She has learnt about working with Muslim women on the ground from BMMA and continues to grow in her work learning from the movement and its leaders.

Triggering Events

Her mother's loss has had a deep impact on her life. She also is disturbed by the civil society's betrayal after the government appropriated Muslim women's struggle against triple divorce. The way BMMA was labelled as a pro right-wing group really affected her and showed her the bigoted, misogynistic and patriarchal side of activists whom she otherwise used to look up to. It took her a very long time to come to terms with the fact that civil society had turned the success of a women's movement into a curse. It was not the fault of the women struggling for years to get a law in their favour to ban triple talaq and other unIslamic practices, that the government proclaimed it as a favour they were bestowing upon them. She never understood what was stopping the others in the political arena to come and stand by the struggle of Muslim women and stop this appropriation. Discrimination at Amnesty India is another incident that has affected her.

CAA passed by the Indian parliament in 2019 coupled with NRC has the potential to render India's Muslims and other caste oppressed minorities devoid of their citizenship status. As a Muslim the passing of this Act has had a very strong impact on her. Through the past one decade, since she started to live on her own, she has experienced different forms of discrimination, owing to her identity, right from housing discrimination to that at workspaces like Amnesty India, but this was different. As an Indian, who has full faith in the values of the constitution, it shook her to see that a law like this was passed. The movement too opposed it tooth and nail, led by the Muslim community, specially by Muslim women,

gave her a lot of hope and inspiration. The crackdown however, on this peaceful dissent that followed was again something that brought a lot of disenchantment in her.

Values and Beliefs

Respect and equal treatment for all

Zero tolerance for any kind of discrimination

Zero tolerance for sexual violence

Biggest Achievement and Biggest Failures

She thinks she has yet to achieve what she may call her biggest achievement. She does not see any of her failures as failures, she looks at them as learning curves. There have been a few and she knew there will be more to come. I am only 33 – she says! In the past couple of years what she has been most humbled by has been the opportunity to interact with minority women and leaders from across the globe. In 2019 she was invited by the OHCHR to mentor a group of minority fellows who had been chosen to attend a month-long fellowship in Geneva. Her eldest mentee was a 60-year old activist whom she fondly called, Brother Ibrahim, from Mauritania. He identifies as a 'former slave', and the youngest was a Roma activist from Hungary.

Her association with BMMA and the women in the movement is again something she thinks is an achievement because to have an opportunity to be able to engage with and learn from selfless Muslim women who have broken the shackles of patriarchy

despite living in poverty and in other shackles is nothing less than an achievement. The way BMMA appreciates and navigates through the intersectionality of the discrimination that Indian Muslim women face is commendable. Entry into Haji Ali, ban on triple talaq are not easy battles to fight when the community looks at women to give up their battles in the 'interest of the larger cause'.

She has grown up in a ghetto in a middle-class Muslim family. She could not enroll herself for a law degree because the elders were not very encouraging of the same and also because family income did not allow her to take the course of her choice in the law school she would have wanted to. Five years later, she applied for and successfully received the Felix scholarship and completed a second master's degree from School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London without having to spend a penny of her own.

Family

She has been living independently of her family for the past ten years now. She is very vocal about her principles and has grown up listening to how she is 'Tez' [sharp] from neighbours who could not digest the fact that a young Muslim girl can question what she thinks is wrong. She openly talked about it being Ok to not being able to make a round roti and saying an absolute No to abusive partners, aunties and uncles in the neighbourhood never understood where this 12-year-old was getting these 'wrong' ideas from. She is very close to her paternal aunt and her younger sister. They are the first ones that she shares her achievements with.

What she has seen through the past decade since she left home is that if one does not have expectations from others then one would never be disappointed. The only person she has expectations of is herself. Yes, friends and to a certain extent family has stood by her, but in the toughest situations in life, she has had her own back.

Income and Spending Decisions

She has lived financially independent of her family so her spending and earning is her own. There have been periods where she has been without a job but she has been able to survive, writing and freelancing for small amounts of money. She is not a spendthrift and neither is she miserly, so that does the trick for her. She has no property of her own. She gets a strong sense of empowerment because of her financial independence. Her first job was at an NGO in Thailand, where she was getting a very humble salary. The fact however, that she could pay her own room rent and buy herself her own lunch and dinner, no matter how small, makes her feel very empowered.

Leadership

She believes she is still growing as a person and in her growth also learning what a good leadership should look like. She would want to believe that she has empathy, respect for those she works for and with compassion; and these are skills that she needs to develop further to be able to lead better.

The news of everyday clampdown on dissent and on anyone who dares to question the current regime is

very disappointing. At the same time, the community and its apathy towards the issues faced by its own women, especially in the name of the larger cause, is also disappointing. To keep herself motivated however, she ensures that she keeps interacting and working with women and other activists on the ground who inspire her with their perseverance to continue struggling, no matter what.

When she sees blatant discrimination around her and when she sees complacency of the state in treating Muslims as second-class citizens, she gets demotivated, temporarily. The normalisation of unequal treatment of women also demotivates her sometimes, but it also ensures that she works with a renewed vigor towards a more equal and just society for women.

She thinks her ability to always be open to learning and questioning at the same time is an important leadership quality. Also, she is very punctual and values time a lot, both hers and of other people. This is one quality of hers that she is proud of!

She gets affected very easily when she hears people are talking negatively about her. She needs to learn to be a little more thick skinned and know that not everyone will like what she says or does. But as long as she knows and believes in what she is doing, it should not affect her as much as it does. She is trying to work on this aspect of her personality.

Toughest Decision

The toughest in terms of repercussions was her decision to resign from Amnesty India and make public

their castiest and Islamophobic management and its functioning. It was however one of the quickest decisions she took because she knew what she was doing and standing up against was right. To work at a human rights organization which refuses to let its women housekeeping staff wear their own clothes and forces uniforms upon them thereby ensuring they look 'different' from the privileged lot, in a country like India, while talking about equality for all, was beyond her dignity. Twice in her career she has been vocal about injustice by her employers towards the marginalised communities that they claimed to be working with and for, and she has left her job without any personal financial security, also at the cost of facing vilification and possible harm.

Inner Being

She believes she is born so that she could lead by example and make small positive change in the lives of the people she meets. After death, she would like people to remember her as honest and kind. Cute baby videos are an antidote to depressing days. She watches those to smile! And she loves to hear sad romantic songs! Mental health is something a lot of us battle with in our daily lives and tend to ignore and not acknowledge. To take each day as it comes is her mantra!

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QAZI NASREEN METAI KARNATAKA



Personal Information

Nasreen stays with 6 other members of her family; her husband, 2 children and 3 of her siblings. At a young age she had to take the responsibility of her siblings as both her parents passed away. She works as a youth coordinator with an NGO and she is also the BMMA state convener of Karnataka, a southern state of India. Her husband, Shivakumar, is a farmer and works as a volunteer in Karnataka Janashakti Sanghatan.

As a child she was highly influenced by her mother. Inspite of grinding poverty, she worked hard and handled her family and work responsibility with courage. Her father also influenced her in many ways, both positive and negative. On the positive side, he was a very secular person, in thinking and in action. Inspite of his own poverty he gave support and shelter to other poor. He was connected to people with all caste and communities. But on the negative side, he was very violent towards her mother simply because she gave birth to daughters. He did not want her to go out to work but stay indoors, within four walls and earn. These experiences have made Nasreen more sensitive towards women's issues and strengthened her feminist values.

Her primary school teacher from the Brahmin community also influenced her. She treated all children equally. It was a government school surrounded by dalit and minority community. After school hours she would call everyone home and treated them well. She would also give special classes in her house for them. She was a secular and kind teacher.

In her teenage years she was learning and gathering knowledge about life from practically every person

who came in her life. She worked on the street selling sugar cane juice. She would constantly come in touch with working class people like the bullock cart riders, rickshaw driver, street vendors etc. They were her real-life teachers who taught her about gender, religion, equality, natural resources, labour issues, sex work of women, poverty, education and so much more. Some of them also protected, supported and guided her to go to college and attend class. They took care of her business while she attended college. She was also influenced by NGO called Sakhi. It helped her build her dreams and changed her path and gave her a life of dignity. It influenced her values towards social change. She was also influenced by Kannad literature. 'Chirasmarane', a book authored by Niranjan on youth movement influenced her in her work with youth. She was also inspired by 'Ondu Tundu Gode' authored by Boluvar Mohammed Kuyi which dwelled on community bonds.

Work Information

Since last 14 years she is working in Sakhi Organisation as Youth Co-ordinator. Sakhi works with dalit and other backward communities, especially with the Devadasi system affected youth. She is also associated with BMMA as a state convener of Karnataka.

Sakhi would regularly organize workshops and meetings on gender, social inclusion, leadership etc. In 2012, Nasreen participated in a state level meeting which was held at Mangalore. This meeting was part of the programme organized to highlight violence against women. In this event thousands of women gathered and voiced their concerns on their issues. She was

so motivated, she immediately joined this forum. In the same year she also attended BMMA's national consultation in Mumbai. For the first time she saw Muslim women gathered in large numbers to demand for their rights. She was highly motivated to work with BMMA and focus on the issues of the women of her own community.

She was also a part of the "Chalo Udupi" event organized collectively by organizations and movements in Karnataka. The purpose was to highlight and oppose caste and communal violence. She was closely involved in organizing this programme along with her youth team. She was highly motivated by this programme and it influenced her a lot. On this common platform Muslim-Dalit-OBC feminists came together with a single focus.

Values and Beliefs

She abhors violence, nobody should do violence on others and nobody should take violence from others. She believes in the equality of all irrespective of gender, caste, class, and religion. Social inclusion, humanity, compassion, love and peace, dignity and worth of individual are key values of her life. Respecting self and others, respecting their belief systems and believing in the dignity of all – this is crucial for a harmonious life.

Biggest Achievement

For her it was the day of her biggest achievement when the practice of triple divorce was legally banned in India. She did her best from her state to highlight the issue and her hard work and perseverance paid off.

Her failures or rather challenges have been her inability to build a forum of women leaders in her city. She has also so far been unable to lead the youth to take forward their issues. It is only a matter of time that she will do all the pending work.

Family

For a very long time, her brother was the only male member of the family. All household chores were divided equally between them. And the same is with her husband now. Her children are still small, but her elder daughter has started to support her now, especially during events. She also asks a lot of questions. Her siblings are like her children and they also support and motivate her. Earlier she would share all the news with her sisters, and now it is her husband. The whole family stands by her today.

Income and Property

Both she and her husband work and financially support the family and take joint decisions. She does not have any property in her name. Even earlier they never had one. Just 7 years back she and her sister constructed her house which is in her mother's name. There was just enough to eat and survive with dignity and never enough to buy a house. In the marital house, they have a one-acre land which is in her mother in laws name. Even her husband's family struggled a lot. For her it is important for a woman to be financially independent but it is not enough. A woman apart from being financially independent must also be free to take a decision, any

decision and also feel free to express her opinions and views.

Leadership

As a leader, Nasreen is a confident person. She believes in democracy and inclusion as a value. She also likes to take people along which is crucial for a leader. She expresses herself clearly and also gives a sound hearing to everyone. She motivates her team.

She motivates herself by discussing issues with others, she reads and understands the different models of work. She reads to understand life journeys of others. On some issues, community views have just not changed at all and that demotivates her.

As a leader sometimes she has to contend with some people in the team who don't work and deliver results. At such times she has to be assertive and talk strictly with them. She is not comfortable with that style of working but realizes that it needs to be done sometimes. To do that is a tough decision for her.

To grow as a leader, she continuously updates herself on current issues, she gets her team together, involves her community leaders and discusses these issues with them. She keeps her team motivated by continuously dialoguing with them, updating them on new knowledge and motivates them to develop skills for their own growth. She believes that networking and gaining and exchanging knowledge and learning with each other is a sure way to develop as a leader. She wants to be emotionally stronger and confident while leading. And above all, humanity, she believes is the most valuable leadership quality.

She believes she is much better than the male leaders that she sees around her and that is because she gives space to others to share their views, she responds to people in a better way than men. And most importantly she believes in gender justice and gender equality and that really sets her apart from most men. She is also comparatively more knowledgeable than men whom she meets in her life. This could probably explain why she has not been able to dialogue with local men on various issues of concern. This she feels is a major barrier in her leadership. She feels the need to engage but does not find them on par with her. She is much ahead in her knowledge and her values. At the same time, she understands that engaging with all stake holders is crucial for a leader.

Many partnerships with various organizations have worked on common issues. She has been part of many networks, many forums and alliances to demand crucial changes from the state and from the society. But on the issue of Muslim law reform, she has not been able to garner support. As has been the experience across the country, Muslim women's efforts towards family law reform as not incited large scale support from civil society groups, especially the feminist groups.

Inner Being

She believes that the purpose of her life is to do something special and to do good work. She wants to be remembered as someone who was a good human being and a good community leader.

When she reaches out to people and when they get involved in the activities for community development,

that makes her feel that she is successful and that brings a smile on her face. She smiles when she sees her children play and when they are happy.

Emotional music which has pathos makes her cry. And she has high hopes from life, which makes her get out of the bad even on a hard day. In times of crisis she responds by sharing her concerns with friends and colleagues, she writes on social media and dialogues with women groups and other networks.

At the time of communal violence, she is very scared. The hatred, the killings and the poison of exclusion scares her, for herself, her family and her community.

She is proud of her self for the fact that she has the capacity to analyze her strengths and weaknesses, review herself and as a woman construct her life with her family. This has turned her into a role model in her community and that makes her very proud of herself.

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NASEEM MANSURI GURJAT



Personal Information

Naseem Mansuri stays in Ahmedabad [Juhapura], in Gujrat, which is the western state of India. She is married and has two daughters. She took divorce from her husband as he would not maintain the family and would insist that she gets money from her parents. She suffered him for a long time. She made efforts to retain the marriage by taking money from her parents. But he could not make a living out of it. He infact went ahead and filed a case against her but himself failed to turn up for the hearings. She eventually divorced him. For many years after divorce, she stayed with her parents who supported her and her two daughters. Eventually after her parents passed away, she now stays in a rented house, independently.

Her parents had a shop where they sold *mitti* utensils, water pots etc. They were 2 brothers and 2 sisters. Both parents worked hard for the business to prosper. It was always a struggle. She would also go with her parents to the shop and help them.

After her divorce she also started working as a community volunteer in an organization called Awaaz. Her salary then was Rs.250/ per month. There she worked as a supervisor overseeing stitching work. Before joining this work, she had no idea about stitching at all. With support from parents and her own earnings she managed the upbringing of her girls. One daughter has done Masters in Social Work and one daughter has done nursing course.

Her mother passed away two years back. After some time, conflicts and fights happened. She decided it is better to have one's independent home rather than

staying with the brother and his family. She now stays independently in a rented house. Both her daughters are married and are having children.

At the time of 2002 genocide in Gujarat, she saw the grief and tragedy of a large number of people. She worked for their relief and rehabilitation. She got associated with Action Aid with whom she worked on the issues of peace and justice. She compared her grief with that of the victims and she realized that she is much better off and she must work for others and help in their difficult times. She became a counselor and started guiding women. She joined BMMA in 2007. That was the only organization to speak about the rights of Muslim women within the family in Gujrat. She worked on the issue of law reform by organizing small awareness meetings with women informing them about their rights. They discussed triple divorce, halala, polygamy and other related matters.

Inspiration

She came to her parent's house with her two children after having clashes with her husband. She was very depressed and would keep crying. Her neighbor told her mother to take her to a neighbourhood organization where she can work and support herself and at the same time be at peace. She joined Awaaz organization. She met women like her and also young girls who were struggling. She got inspired by all these women and told herself that she can also make her life better. She was given more responsibility in the organization. She was made a supervisor. That gave her a lot of confidence that she can do it and she is capable. Her confidence grew.

She is thankful to her neighborhood aunty who showed her the way.

She has studied till 7th class but has acquired a lot of knowledge through trainings. She knows a lot about law, religion, and rights of women in Islam, about laws for women, about constitution, about gender-based violence. She says other than a license to practice law, she knows everything and she continues to help and support women.

Family support

Her father always thought of her as a son, would make her wear pants and call her his son. When she got divorced, that time too he supported her. He encouraged her by saying that life is long and God has given you good health and mental capacity. So you must work towards leading a good life and be happy. When she started attending trainings and would be away for 3–4 days or come late from work, her parents never objected and in fact encouraged her to work.

Leadership

Amongst the many skills she has as a leader, the important one is her ability to talk to people and make instant friends. She can reach out to people, start talking and make friends, *kisi ko bhi apna bana sakti hoon*, she says.

She wants to educate herself more. She was not able to finish her formal education, which she regrets. She is also not very comfortable with English which she does not understand much. She wants to work on that skill as well. Communication and coordination then becomes very easy.

When her mother passed away, she had difficulties with her brother and his family. She felt scared and worried about staying alone. How will she manage? *Himmat toot gayi thi.* But she pulled herself up.

Inner Being

She never gets disheartened when there are difficulties. She always had a positive attitude, no matter how bad things are, she always thinks of how can she make it better, how can she go ahead. She never lost hope. She says, 'If I don't have food today, it does not matter, tomorrow I will have biryani'. That is always the attitude of looking forward to a better tomorrow. When she had to leave her parents' house, she did it herself, looked out for a rented house, bought essential items for the house and shifted. She started a new life. 'Never to get tired. Face the situation. If you sit down in face of difficulty, it will never improve, in fact go worse'. *Khadde me se nikalne ke liye himmat karni padegi aur aage badhna padega.*

After the communal riots of 2002, husbands started to instantly divorce their wife. She started counseling such families. She took efforts to keep the family together and she is proud of the fact that many families were saved from breaking up because of her efforts.

She likes to spend time with her family. She would spend time with her mother, take her around. Now she stays alone. She loves to sing old film songs and also read.

She is friendly, she likes to tease people who are sad so that they laugh and become happy again.

QAZI NISHAT HUSSEIN RAJASTHAN



Personal Information

Her name is Badrunnisa Hussein but she is fondly called Nishat. She is from Karauli, Rajasthan, a western state of India. She is a daughter of Karouli, as she says. Her father Shabbir Hussein, was a famous tailor in that area. He was very honest and a man of integrity. He would get very rich women coming to his shop to stitch clothes. Nishat would complain to him that they don't have such rich clothes. To which he would always say, look at people below you and not those above you. These were some of the important lessons she learnt as she grew up.

Her childhood economic conditions were poor. They were two sisters and one brother. Her mother passed away when her younger sister was still breastfeeding. So, she and her siblings were brought up by her grandmother. Her father did not remarry and spent his entire life looking after his children. She stayed in Sitawadi, which was a Hindu area. Their family was the only Muslim family. Those were times when girls were not educated and Muslim girls were even further away from education. It was considered a sin. Her father was poor but progressive in his thinking. He wanted his children to educate themselves. She studied in a school in Karauli, which was the only school in that area. There was a lot of pressure on her and her father to withdraw her from the school but she continued. She says she has progressed in life only because of her school, her teachers and her grandmother.

Amongst the 1200 girls in school she was the only Muslim girl. She remembers that phase fondly as there was so much of love and solidarity with each other. In class 9 itself she was elected as school president after

defeating the class 10 representative. Only 12 votes went against her. After she won, the entire school took out a procession and took her to her house. Everyone in the locality was looking at her with respect and admiration. That was the environment of love and acceptance. She says *main jin godo me pali badi vo koi muslim gode nahi, sabhi hindu gode theen*. She grew up in the Hindu laps and looked after by Hindu families. Hindu neighbors took decisions about her family and decisions about their families were taken by her family. She learnt about Hindu-Muslim solidarity and love from those experiences. When anyone talks of Hindu Muslim violence today, she is not able to bear it. She can feel the anger in her and it is this anger that has got her to this stage of life and made her work for communal harmony.

She finished her class 10 and was married at the age of 17, as her grandmother was very old and insisted that she gets married. Nishat saw her class 10 results in her marital house. This family was highly educated. Her sister in law was a BA. Her husband was a head clerk and was later promoted as a gazetted officer. When she married in this house, she was the least educated. She had come from a village and had a different accent as she spoke. Small children in her family would teach her the language and accent. She was always taunted for being from a village. But she would not feel bad about it. She had to take lot of pain and effort to get herself to do what she wanted and improve herself. Amidst all this she had 2 sons and one daughter. Her dreams of getting educated and doing something in life got stalled, as she got busy with her children.

Other than schoolbooks, they were not allowed to read magazines or hear the radio. There was not much of

an understanding about family life, how many children to bear etc. Her mother in law encouraged her to adopt family planning and limit her children to three. She spoke to her husband embarrassingly and ensured that they did not have more children.

She is very proud of the fact that both her daughter in laws are Hindus; they never felt that they have come from another religion. They support her and look after her; some adjustments happened on both sides but there is a lot of love and understanding. She says with pride, 'my home reflects the India of my dreams'!

Influencers

Nishat was inspired by her grandmother. Her grandmother had taken part in the freedom struggle. She used to collect funds from her locality and send it to people who were involved in India's struggle for freedom against the British. She wore khadi the entire life. During eid or other celebrations when she was asked to wear good clothes, she would refuse saying this is her country's cloth and she won't wear anything else. She wore khadi because Gandhiji liked khadi. She would share stories of how the British were cruel and how they destroyed the country. Nishat was so influenced by her stories that she started to hate English. Also, English was taught only from class 6 onwards in government schools and that was also one of the reasons for Nishat to not gain fluency in the language.

There were many restrictions on Nishat. Her grandmother would not let her be friends with boys. Even if she would be late by 5 minutes from school, she would come to the school to take her. She would be

worried about her and although she could not see well, she would still come to school.

She had a big neem tree in her compound. All her friends, across religion, would come together and play. They would climb trees and sing songs and be on the swing all the time. She would play *kabaddi* with boys, play *situali* and *goli*, and play *rassi* as well. She played badminton too. She can never forget those wonderful childhood memories which continue to fill her up with joy.

Family Support

As her children grew, Nishat joined a school as a teacher. She would earn Rs. 75/. But that was not so important to her. She wanted to teach, go out of the house, do something for the country. Her mother in law understood her emotions and gave her the permission to work in the school. That school had children coming from poor families. The quality of education was not so good. She put in her best and changed the environment of the school. She ensured that children came on time, that fees were paid on time. Due to her efforts there was an improvement in the quality of education. The founder of the school was very happy with her contribution. Because of her efforts, admissions increased. Lot of Muslim children too enrolled. But she was not happy with the management of the school. She had a chat with her family members and started a school in her own house. Within a year 350 children enrolled. New students as well as students from her previous school also joined. 75% of the students were Hindus and 25% were children from other communities. That time the

per month fee per student was Rs. 5. Except her kitchen, the entire house was full of children. Then she employed 10–15 teachers. She would distribute her husband's income as salaries to the teachers. She got full support from her family. And more than anything else, the support from her husband was very crucial. She says, 'he was a feminist in himself and stood by me'.

Education

She managed this school well but soon realized that as a founder member of the school, she was only 10th class pass and her teachers, whom she employed, were qualified teachers. So, she decided to further educate herself. She then did her 12th, then BA and then B.Ed. And she while she studied, she managed the entire house, the school and her children. There were 15 members in the family then. She managed their food and all the other chores as per the schedule. She would get up at 3 am and start to make tiffin for everyone, for her husband, for her sister in laws. Then she would rush to the school, come back home during the break and finish other chores of the house. That is how difficult it was, but she kept her school alive. After her B.Ed she was now qualified to be the head of the school. Now when she sat on that chair, she felt that she deserved it and that now she is able to do justice with her team members. She finally was able to let go of her inferiority complex. The school functioned very well from 1983 to 1989.

During this phase her daughter was also married, but even she was underage. She shifted to Dubai after marriage. The boys were still educating themselves. Around this time her brother in law and sister in laws

were also studying. And later got married. All this while she fulfilled all her responsibilities as the daughter in law. She also worked in school. Her husband and father in law were working, so both managed the household expenses. After 14 years of marriage, her mother in law decided to let each one set up their independent kitchen, which means a separate household. She did not agree to it, as she was happy in a joint family. But her mother in law insisted that while she is alive the division must happen. So, she and her brother in laws family separated. But they all had food together. On the same table would be her elder brother in law, her father in law but there was no purdah or *ghunghat*. Everybody talked to each other and there was no traditional separation or conservative talks.

Triggering Event

But 1989 turned things for her and the city of Jaipur. It was engulfed in communal violence as a precursor to the Babri masjid demolition. In the violence, her son's friends, who would come to her house and go directly in the kitchen to eat food and were like family, turned hostile and full of communal poison. The administration of the city just followed the orders of the government which was to fan communal hatred. Most Muslim homes around her were destroyed, families fled and houses and sources of income were burned down. She still remembers one family, which had 30–40 goats, kept in the house and they had to flee leaving them in the house. That house was burned down and the screams of the burning goats still rings in her ears. That incident was the turning point. She left her house for the first time without a *burkha*, people saw her face for the first

time. She was on the roads and blocked a police van. She reminded them of the pledge that they took when they joined the services. And the pledge now required them to provide safety and protection to all, irrespective of their class or religion. She told them that they should be ashamed that instead of protecting they are destroying. She told them; today she has left her house without her *burkha* only to remind them of their duties and their commitment to the constitution. She tried to snatch their pistol and kill herself. She told them that she does not want to be killed by children who used to come to her house every day. The police officers at least for that moment realized their folly. They immediately dispersed the marauding crowds.

As a result of her intervention, police beat office was set up in her locality. The women of the locality told the men, finally it was a woman who led to this change and men should be ashamed of themselves that they could do nothing for the security of the family and community. They said, we have amidst us a lioness whose courage led to setting up a police chowki. This incident also helped her realize that it is the women who pay the price for all that is wrong in our society. Either her husband dies, or her children die or her source of income is ruined or she is raped and abused. During the entire curfew period she was very angry with the police, she never took their help to get anything from the market, nor gave them even a cup of tea. As curfew was lifted, they wanted to have food in her house. They said to her husband, how come he is staying with such an angry woman? Her husband told them, the anger was legitimate with what was happening around the area. The police thanked her for awakening their conscience at the right time; otherwise a lot of people would have been dead.

These incidents also made her realize that it is so important for us to have a dialogue with the police and we need to also try and understand their issues and concerns. She advised them that as police officers, they are at the forefront and they have achieved in life because of their own efforts. They should not be scared of their political bosses but do their duty as per the requirement of the law. That day, she was called the 'Fauji Mahila'[army woman].

Around this time, her school students and their parents, who largely were poor, and Hindu, came forward to help. They surrounded the school and protected it saying that if violence happens over school, then there will be a Hindu-Hindu violence. They said this school is started by that woman who believes in humanity and is beyond the Hindu-Muslim divide. They said she is instrumental in giving education to their children. 'Where were you Hindus when our children were not getting education?' they asked. Nishat was happy to see that her engagement with her students and their families bore fruit. They came out of their homes in such difficult times, without worrying about the dangers to their lives and defended the school. That was her happiest moment.

At that point of time, men were put behind bars under the dreaded TADA. There were atleast 7-8 of them from her mohalla and one of them was a Muslim. She went to the jail to meet them. The superintendent told her that there is only one Muslim amongst them. There too she fought with him, saying that he being a superintendent should not be talking in terms of communities. These divisions will turn the country into a chaos, it will turn it hallow and lifeless. This discrimination will do no

good. She said, 'they are not Hindu or Muslims, they are my neighbors and I am here for my neighbors, my own people, my country people'. He was moved by her talk and thereafter any programme in the jail and he would invite her for the same. She went to meet the families of these men and consoled them and understood their problems and concerns. Some welcomed her, some did not. They made allegations against her, against her character. But she continued her work.

She, along with a few women started a women's organization called the National Muslim Women Welfare Society. This is the first Muslim women's organization in Jaipur, her city. As one of the first tasks, she took a bus-full of women to meet the Chief Minister of the state. He was from the BJP but personally a secular person. Women shared with him the horrors of communalism and how in such times the police had turned rogue. He listened to them intently and took the memorandum from them. Next day the newspapers had front page news of Muslim women finally managing to reach the chief minister of the state. Subsequently, media always gave her that space, appreciated her efforts, and understood her point of view. Nishat time and again proved that she has a natural flair to make even the highest officer and the most powerful politician see sense. She is not scared to speak the truth, no matter how powerful the other person is.

Risk

When she started handling TADA cases, the CBI started to tag her, thinking that there is some other power behind her. Here too, she was totally fearless and one

fine day, confronted them for tagging and following her. On being confronted the officers told her that they are only doing their duty and that they are actually shocked to see the amazing work that she is doing. And with that, her goodwill with the CBI also increased. She worked extensively post riots, for TADA victims and for affected families. She once visited a prison cell in Ajmer, where many men were cramped in a small place, some had wounds festering, some had lost their mental balance, some had medical issues. The holy book, Quran was torn to pieces. She informed the CM about the state of affairs in the prison and he immediately took action. Other facilities were then introduced in the jail. He was her rakhi brother and every raksha bandhan he would give her rakhi money of Rs. 101/- . These prisoners whenever they would be out on parole, would visit her and tell her that in every namaz, they pray for her. She is one woman who is standing with us, she is not scared. That time no lawyers were willing to take their case, although all were false cases. She managed the expenses of their families and kept in touch with them.

Family Support

The reason behind starting a Muslim women's organization was not just to work on Muslim women's issues but also to convey to the world that we are also concerned about our country. We as Muslim women want to be partners in development.

At the time of starting the organization her husband had warned her that this work is not easy. The environment is not conducive at all. There is a certain way in which the community is perceived by the

government, by the larger society. He asked her, on how many fronts will you be fighting? Nobody is listening to us, neither the government, nor the police, nor the court. Nishat replied to her husband that there is a power who is listening to us. She told him not to stop her from working and if he did, something in the relationship will break. He understood that she is unstoppable and it is better that no hurdles are placed before her.

After the organization was formed, she would visit Hindu and Muslim families, forging communal harmony. She insisted that both communities do business together. The *nagina* [gem] business cannot function without Hindus and Muslims together. She would tell them, we only harm ourselves when we hate each other. Some would agree with her and some would not but she continued her crusade. She had a natural strength and passion; she felt that there was some divine hand which gave her the strength to fight it out. She would walk into the police station as if it belonged to her. She would be constantly fighting and demanding from the local MLA and MPs. The police station also realized that this woman will fight it out because she is in the right.

Tough Decision

This was also the time, when her son's Hindu friends would trouble her sons and pressurize them to ask their mother to stop talking about Hindu Muslim unity. She did not stop her work and her family had to bear the brunt of it. Her sons and husband were brutally attacked by them. So much so, that they had to be hospitalized in critical condition. They were operated and were in hospital for many days. Those were bad days for

her because her entire family for the first time stood against her. Her two boys were the only male children in her husband's side of the family. So the entire family considered them special. Her father in law then told her that her leadership is going to be fatal for the family. That was a bad phase for her. She was conflicted, scared for her children and wondered if this is the end of it all. But she did not back out. After one and half year the same set of boys who attacked her sons, came and stood before her and asked for forgiveness. She had not filed a complaint against them and she did not want to because she knew that someone else poisoned these boys. But it was a criminal case, which had happened in public. The boys shared how because of that incident their families have disowned them and they are not getting employment. She hugged them and told them they are her children. She testified before the fast track court that these boys were innocent. That needed a lot of courage. She is happy that she did that. Today this locality loves her and she is made part of every decision that is taken. She is approached for all civic issues, legal issues and or any other matter. This trust has been formed after a lot of sacrifices, even to the extent of almost getting her sons killed.

The first 4 years of the organization, lot of work was done on communalism, working closely with the administration and media. She got a lot of support from them. The administration openly acknowledged that it is only because of Nishat that Ramganj today is peaceful and safe.

She shares another incident when the Muslim community had decided to hoist black flag on the Republic Day. The police approached her to help them.

She went lane by lane and convinced the Muslims that this festival is a national festival and we will all work to protect the constitution and instead of black we will hoist the tricolor. That worked and nobody hoisted black flag that day. The administration was happy with her and on their recommendation, she was given the National Unity Award. She initially refused the Award as the communal violence had truly disturbed her. Government was surprised because people bribe in order to get this award and here is this woman who is refusing it. After the national, she got the state award, the shantidoot award and many thereafter. She was never happy receiving it as it would be a burden on her. It was a responsibility that she would be bearing so that nothing taints her name and her work.

She also began Adult Literacy classes for women. And with classes, came in cases of domestic violence and abuse. This pushed her into worked as a counselor and legal aid worker for women. She handles hundreds of cases every year and is responsible for arbitration and reconciliation and settling family disputes. Her centre is a hub for women to seek help and support.

With time she started to talk of Muslim women's rights. She would tell them that they are lucky to have the constitution on one hand and the Quran on the other. It is unfortunate that neither men nor women are aware of their rights. Without this awareness, it is not possible to ameliorate conditions. So she started to organize awareness programmes on legal rights. She reached out to the victims and she reached out to the perpetrators, men, as well. The response from men was also good. Many religious groups objected but the men drove them away saying that these groups have turned

them into a well-frog, never exposed us to the right knowledge. The religious leaders just kept on insisting on doing namaz, without sharing anything about the rights and responsibilities. Men said, for the first time they have understood the rights of women in Islam. Men, promised that they will never hit their women and will not abuse them.

Nishat then went on to form working women's groups. The women made products and sold them in the market without a broker. Lot of women thus emerged as entrepreneurs and did wonderful work in the communities. At this point of time, BMMA got started and Nishat became one of the founding states when it was launched. And with it she became part of the national scene.

Many wrote against BMMA and its founding members. Volunteers of BMMA also did not have it easy. There was resistance from the family and from the larger community. There were campaigns run on the social media. But BMMA volunteers only felt sorry for those people, as they were the ones who are not following the path set by the Prophet. If they had followed Prophet's path or the path of his wife, the community would not have reached this impasse. These attacks on BMMA only weakened them not the women.

One of the key issues, which emerged during those days, was the way women were orally divorced by their husband and thrown out of their homes with the children. She had no place to go, neither her marital nor her maternal family. BMMA took up this issue after a wider consultation. Thereafter many public hearings and meetings were held for victims to share their story.

Consultations were done with women who declared that this practice must end. A big public meeting was held in Delhi, where victim after victim shared their horrendous story of how they turned into destitute in a matter of seconds. The voice of women grew stronger and stronger and the religious groups again started to suppress that voice. Those very groups who were responsible for all that went wrong with the community and how with their utterances they defamed Islam and Muslims. Another meeting was held with lawyers, political groups, and religious groups and in front of them the victims again narrated their ordeal. But these religious groups never took women seriously, they never took any step to concretely address the issue. It was then that Muslim women realized that *mere pair ka kaanta mujhi se niklega*. Muslim women will have to do something on their own to ameliorate their own conditions.

The stories of victims were also published as a book and various other publications were sent even to the PMOs office. Signature campaigns were done and thousands of signatures were sent to all MPs, national women's commission, law commission and even to the PMOs office. While BMMA was fighting this cause, 5 victims went to the Supreme Court to demand an end to this practice. At this stage too the religious groups had some chance to intervene and find a way out. But instead of doing that they accused women of being unintelligent and of being anti-Islamic. By making such allegations they made a mockery of themselves.

She vividly remembers the day when the Supreme Court judgment against triple divorce was going to be announced. She waited with bated breath and when she came to know that the judgment went against the

practice, she was ecstatic. Her joy knew no bounds. Some of BMMA's state leaders were there and the media swamped them. Many people give credit to the Modi government for this legislation and many others also accuse him of playing his card against the Muslim men. But BMMA has been working on these issues since 2007. It is a matter of chance that the BJP government was in power. Political parties may come and go but state as an institution to ensure justice remains. The SC then asked the government to make a law. The Quranic verses on divorce are very good but if they are not implemented it does not help the women.

Then the process of law making began with so much of uproar in Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. But truth triumphs. Constitution and the Quran won. Both the houses of Parliament passed the law. It was the first time in the history of independent India that Muslim women on their own effort and hard work won a legislation for themselves. Many tried to take credit for it after having played a negative role while the campaign was on. They also make a claim that, triple divorce must end, but But their 'buts' never end and they never made a final decisive drive against it. BMMA did it for the benefit of scores of Indian Muslim women.

After the law was passed, BMMA also asked for certain amendments to the law and even gave an amended version for the government to consider.

People who objected against BMMA and its law reform campaign assume that they are close to the government and the courts and these institutions only do what they ask them to do. But it never works that way. The government and the courts have their own method

of functioning and nobody can always influence it. But if people thought that BMMA was so influential then so be it. Nishat says, BMMA's fight against polygamy and halala will continue. It is awaiting the judgment against the practice through its PIL in the Supreme Court. BMMA has also been demanding a codified Muslim family law. Many may accuse, but the current and the coming generations of Muslim women will thank the BMMA team.

Other than the campaign against triple divorce, BMMA has managed to break all those traditions, which have been going on for centuries. For the first time, women became qazis. For the first time, Women's Sharia Courts were set up. BMMA also challenged the ban on women's entry into Haji Ali dargah. Nishat found new strength after joining BMMA.

She finds Zakia and Noorjehan as very capable women. They have written books and they have led BMMA successfully. She is very proud of them. They have been respected for their work by everyone.

Nishat complains that they don't have any support nor do they have any resources. And yet she says, 'we are our own strength. We are not the kinds who will back out. We will continue our onward march and achieve our goal.'

Leadership

As a leader she is very sensitive and she is unable to bear the pain and trauma of women. The way the Muslim community is treated as secondary citizens is also very painful. But she says, we have to go on and continue to

work. Injustice against anyone is what motivates her. But she also believes that after so many decades of work there is some amount of maturity and solidity that has crepted in. There is no fear now. She says that if we would have been the types to get scared, we would not be in this field.

Right now the communal virus is spreading and how even in times of COVID pandemic it has refused to leave the psyche of people. Immediate judgements and hate statements against China, against Muslims, against the poor and even against the infected!! It is very painful. People are dying of hunger, there is no food, and migrants and daily wage earners are suffering. During the entire COVID pandemic, Nishat and her team worked relentlessly and reached out to the poor and migrant families with dry ration. They raised funds and her youth group worked to reach out to the poor. The youth group of BMMA was formed so they could be trained on issues of gender, constitution, communal amity, civil and political rights etc. The commitment of the youth is commendable as they are not even worried about themselves but want to serve the needy and the poor. She is ably supported by Mr. Faiyaz and Mr. Salim, retired police officers, in her effort.

Islam tells her that even if you continue to acquire education from the cradle to your grave, it will not be enough. She believes she is deficient in theoretical knowledge but she has learnt so much from even illiterate women. Sometimes such women say things which are out of the world and they teach what no university would teach. In BMMA she was pushed into educating herself through regular trainings,

through reading training material, by giving exams and constantly upgrading herself. New subjects and topics were regularly introduced in the training programmes. She felt like she was attending school, with love and with strictness sometimes the 'teachers' of BMMA taught them new topics. She is shy of writing and documenting which she is now trying to improve.

Challenge

She says she is a woman. And everywhere she goes she is first looked upon as a woman. Whatever she is she is after the part where she is a woman. A man will always try to first ascertain her character, because she is a woman. That is one of the foremost challenges.

She has faced many difficulties and challenges. But every time she faced a challenge, she recalled the words of an officer, who said, only those trees are stoned which bear fruits. He told Nishat that her leadership is being recognized and that is not something which the powerholders are happy about. They attack because they are insecure. They are afraid of her work and her contribution.

In specific, the biggest challenge was to release those innocents who were put under TADA. And the second challenge was during triple divorce campaign when people really said the worse kinds of things. She saw the impact of it when at the recent Shaheen Baug in Jaipur she was not allowed to speak because she was the one who was part of the triple divorce campaign. Women were in the forefront but actually the conservative men were controlling it.

The other challenge is that even after the law, women are not getting much relief. The police are not able to help and since in Rajasthan, it is the Congress government, they won't listen because they were against the legislation anyway. There are issues in getting the FIR done. There are challenges and Nishat and her team are fighting.

Inner Being

Nishat says she wants to work in the community, make people's lives better and raise issues of justice. She has been inspired by Prophet Mohammed's last speech focused on women's empowerment. And as a result, women of the early Islam were very strong. She takes her inspiration from Islam as it gives her the freedom to do what she is doing. The Prophet had also predicted that the most harm to Islam will come from its alims. And through her work, Nishat challenges these very alims, who have through their fake knowledge destroyed the fair name of Islam as well as brought untold misery to women.

When she sometimes falls ill, her children tease her; they say, since no troubled woman has come today to the centre, she has fallen ill. Family and doctors and all well-wishers ask her to take it easy and not to worry about the whole world. But if she is not working on a particular day, she is the most restless. Her work consumes her and gives her immense satisfaction.

When justice is done, when a helpless gets help and support, when a hunger stricken gets food, shelter and clothing, when families are reunited, when children

are happy with happy parents – she gets a smile on her face.

When the administration and police respect the constitution – she is happy

She has no time for music, but she likes old ghazals and the songs sung by women, made by women, songs of women's issues. *Ab kaid parindo ne udne ki thaani hai, sayyad ke pinjre me daana hai na paani hai.* [the caged birds have decided to fly because the cage does not have any means of sustenance]

She cries when a woman faces violence. Women come to her centre with eyes swollen, clothes torn and children crying; and then she narrates the horrors that she faced; Nishat at such times cannot control her tears. She is traumatized when a woman is driven out of the house, when she is discriminated, where she is beaten up, when she is not respected, when she is brutalized, when small girls are raped, irrespective of their age. About rape she says there was a time when parents worried about their girl after she attained a particular age. Now they worry all the time because the rapists do not see the age of the girl. Women across all ages are vulnerable. She cries when she sees small girls, raped, murdered and burnt alive or buried.

Moment when you were Very Scared

The first riot that happened in 1989 really scared her. She and her family were trying to save themselves. She was scared of being raped and abused. That fear was also her strength. And then she has the final words on fear: 'We are also not the type to get scared. We scare others'

Moments of Pride

She is proud of the fact that she started the National Muslim Women Welfare Society, the first of its kind in Rajasthan. She is proud of having met the founder members of BMMA and taking forward the work of BMMA in Rajasthan; they have inspired her. All those who once opposed her are now coming in with their cases of domestic abuse and violence. She feels proud that they have finally accepted her and have acknowledged that good work happening through her and her team.

Words are not enough to convey emotions she felt when she graduated as a qazi. She and others qazis in BMMA broke the centuries old tradition that allowed only men to hold that post. Also, none of them have inherited that post from their father. They are the first-generation women qazis, formally trained and certified by a legally established institution called the Darul Uloom-e-Niswan. Since it was a formally organized course with a set syllabus, they underwent a long process of education by experts, they gave exams, both oral and written. In the course they learnt about the constitution, personal laws, Quranic rights and other provisions which they can access in their role of a qazi. To people who accuse her of being anti-Islamic, she says, 'We are only following the first word of Quran, iqra, I have educated myself, what wrong have I done? What is my crime? There is nothing in Islam, which prohibits me from becoming a qazi.'

**NIYAZMEEN DAHIYA
DELHI**



Personal Information

They are 6 brothers and sisters. She is second in line. Two brothers and two sisters are younger to her. She belonged to a poor family. Father was always ill and mother a housewife. But inspite of the difficult conditions, her parents always wanted their children to educate themselves. She had to leave her studies after her 10th class because of poverty. She got scholarship from an NGO for a year but they could not continue with the scholarship as her sister also wanted to study and she had also applied for support. Since two people from the same family could not be eligible for the scholarship, Niyazmeen dropped out. Eventually she continued her studies after marriage and did her Masters in Social Work from IGNOU.

After dropping out of school, she started giving tuitions in the house. She would also do a lot of work in the house, like making jewelry etc. With that money she resumed her studies. But there were too many expenses; her sister had to be married and loans had to be repaid. Somebody had to get out of the house to get an income. She took that responsibility and started to work. She worked as an assistant to a doctor in a nursing home. She was earning just Rs. 1000 for the whole month; no leave and no other benefits. She worked for three years and continued with her studies. She was able to be a big help to her parents. She left her job in the nursing home and joined Mamta NGO. She kept changing jobs, getting better and better. She was able to repay the debts, sister also got married and she bought a better house for her parents. She was sure she did not want to live in a slum area.

Her parents thought of her marriage, when she was doing her Bachelor of Social Work. They wanted her to marry her cousin. She did not like his mentality as he was very conservative with women. So she refused the marriage but she was pressurized. They said he does not drink and gamble, which means he is good enough. It did not matter to her parents that he did not have a liberal outlook, but it did matter to Niyazmeen. Her parents did not listen to her. They had already committed and did not want to go back on their word. She was under tremendous pressure but managed to avoid any alliance with him for three years. But she was finally engaged to him. She was working in an NGO then. She spoke to the in charge there who assured her that if she wants to leave her house, then they can help her. She took a big step. Instead of living in a cesspool, she took the risk and she left her home. She sent a letter to police, saying that she is an adult, she does not want to marry but wants to study further. She stayed in YWCA, a women's hostel for 3 months. During this time, her parents did not contact her. Around this time, Satish, her husband approached her and proposed marriage to her. She spoke to the NGO incharge who had supported her. She agreed to help her get married to Satish. The NGO bore the expenses of the marriage.

His parents may have accepted her socially, but mentally they did not accept her. They would taunt her for being a Muslim, or that she has eloped from her parents' house. They would say, if she could not belong to her parents, how could she belong to them? She had to tolerate a lot of taunts from them. She stayed in a joint family of three brother in laws and Satish's parents. It was a family of 7 people. Once she used the big burner of the

gas for cooking, which she was not supposed to. On this her father in law was about to hit her with a wiper. That was the last straw. Thereafter she asked herself, why am I tolerating this behavior? Being a social activist herself, if she is helping others, why can't she help herself? Her husband supported her. She left his house, stayed with her friend for a 5–6 days. She told her husband that she is fine if he decides to go ahead and stay with his parents. She has no issues about it. But she told him that she can no longer take the mental stress. Her husband assured her that they would shift to an independent house. Her father in law had another house in which they started to stay there, although it was a house in a slum. But atleast they would be saving on rent. They thus set up their independent house. She had no utensils, nothing in that house. She started from scratch and set up her home, just the two of them and no support from either of the parents.

After 3 years of marriage, they got a child. She joined BMMA around that time. In BMMA she got a lot of affection. She says it is like her second family, after husband and her child. She is appreciated and gets good guidance and motivation. Even if she is wrong, she is motivated positively. Everyone is positive and when the entire team meets everyone smiles and are always happy.

Influencers

As a teenager she was associated with Mamta organization. The social workers there would take sessions with them and she learnt from them. Her mother was also part of a Self Help Group and was very active. She was also in the mahila panchayat and again

very active. Her mother was very keen that Niyazmeen joins Mamta as a social worker. That happened eventually. Within the organization, she was influenced by Ms. Saroj, who would come regularly to their community. She was respected and loved by all. That is how she was influenced and wanted to be like her. She was made a peer educator in the organization and later, a leader. She eventually joined the organization. She worked in Mamta for two and then got a better opportunity in some other organization. And now she is representing a state for BMMA, which is big achievement for her.

Values

She believes that equality and education are crucial for human development. If there is no education, equality is not possible. Especially for the Muslim community, which does not encourage its girls to study. They do not realize the harm they are doing to the girls and to the community. Even religious knowledge is limited to reading Quran in Arabic, which anyway nobody understands. Not many know Urdu also. So as a community we have confined ourselves to just religious education, whereas Islam has always insisted on an all-round education which helps one to live a better life.

Achievement

She is known in her community as a leader. She has also been out of India for a seminar which means that people who sent her showed trust in her capability. For her going out of the country is a big achievement as

nobody has done that in her family. Also because of this opportunity she also was able to reunite with her mother. She was upset with Niyazmeen over her marriage to Satish. She started to talking to her as she prepared herself to go for the seminar. Her father still is angry with her for her marriage, but otherwise the rest of the family is good to her.

Support from Family

Her husband has always supported her. He is actually a friend and worked together in an NGO. They were part of a group which did street plays on HIV, education and other issues. The group also made short films and did surveys. They knew each other well and he also supported her when she was pressurized into marrying her cousin. He also made her realize that she must learn to live for herself. She was always dedicated to her family and never bought anything for herself. He was the one, who made her realize that she must look after herself, fulfill her own needs also. Whenever her in laws said anything to her, he supported her, he never left her alone. Even if she has to travel for work, he takes leave from his work and stays back home to look after their small son.

Household Expenses

She saves her money and when required in emergencies she dips into it. Her husband has taken the responsibility of their monthly expenses. He never makes claims on her money. He tells her it is her money and she can do whatever she wants to do with it.

She has a flat in her name. She strongly feels that it is very important that a woman is financially independent. Because she is not financially strong, she lands up tolerating her husband's torments. A woman thinks that if he is paying for expenses then he is superior and that she must be subservient to him. She does not realize her own economic contribution through the care work that she does for the family.

They take turns and do household chores. He looks after the baby if she is busy. He does household chores if she is busy. When he is busy, she chips in with work. He is an advocate and has his own practice. He also gives tuitions and from poor students he does not take fees. He is basically a social worker and through her fulfills his dreams.

Leadership

Through BMMA she got an opportunity to work at the state level, which she had never done before. It is a big responsibility. Before joining BMMA she never knew whether triple divorce is really an issue. But after working in the community she came to know what chaos it creates in the life of a woman. She realized that work needs to be done on those aspects of women's life on which nobody wants to focus. Her contribution to the cause of abolishing triple divorce, is her big achievement.

At the time of the triple divorce campaign although she was worried about the community reaction, she was also motivated to contribute to the campaign. Because of intense media campaign a lot of women came forward to share their stories and many also showed their

support. She appeared on TV many times highlighting the demand for ending this discriminatory practice. She also motivated women to speak up against the practice in public. It was also frustrating at times but at such times her husband supported her and pepped her up. She also spoke to her founder members and kept up her motivation.

She is very confident and speaks a lot. She got her good speaking skills as a result of her training programmes with women.

She feels the need to improve her English; she also wants to learn to raise funds; she also feels the need to read a lot. There is passion but there is need for resources as well. Even the other BMMA volunteers are from poor and middle-class families. Hence the strong need is felt to raise funds and the need to develop fund raising skills.

The biggest risk that she has taken so far has been her marriage itself. When she left her house, she had no idea how things will be. She wanted to commit suicide. But she got support from her NGO friends. She thinks she is lucky to have found the right people. She stayed in a shelter home for 3 months. In another risky incident, when she went ahead to help a woman, she in turn filed a case against her. She had never been to a court and now she had to go there as an accused. She works for women's empowerment and here was a woman who dragged her to the court. In yet another instance, a woman wanted to marry her husband. So, in these cases, she felt very depressed but she was very patient during this time. She believed strongly that good times will come. She prayed to God for patience. She dealt

with her adversaries with patience, compassion and understanding.

Inner Being

She wants to be remembered by people as someone who did so much work for the community. She wants them to believe that if she would not have been around, it would have been difficult. She wants them to remember her positives and ignore her negatives. She wants to be an ideal for them.

Earlier she felt that she should work for all women, but after working with Muslim women, she has resolved to work with Muslim women. As a Muslim woman she thinks it is her responsibility to work for the betterment of the community. She wants Muslim women to be an equal partner in development.

Her child's smile makes her smile. His babbling and gurgling always puts a smile on her face. She likes old romantic songs.

She cries when she thinks of her father. He was upset with her when she married a Hindu. She wants him to accept her and take her in his arms.

She has been very scared when she had to face blackmail from a girl who threatened that she will put her husband behind bars on charges of rape. She wanted to save her husband and also that girl without harming her dignity. She had gone into depression because of the issue. She was scared of losing her husband. What will she do, where will she go with a two-month-old child? That incident scared her the most.

She is very proud of the fact that she is the only woman in her family who has been abroad and has studied so much. And she is so much in the media because of her work.

She is motivated by her husband to continue to work when times are difficult. And then she also thinks, if I don't do it, nobody else will. She does a lot of positive and motivating self-talk.

She is very thankful to BMMA for giving her the opportunity to come forward and take the leadership of the community. BMMA is her first identity. She is known as a BMMA volunteer. One maulvi had known about BMMA when he spoke to her. So she is happy that the organization is known all over the country for its work with Muslim women and she is proud to be associated with it.

9

**NOORJEHAN DIWAN
GUJRAT**



Noorjahan stays in Sabarkantha, Himmat nagar in Ahmedabad, in Gujrat, a western state of India. She studied till 12th class and then she got married. After marriage she wanted to study, but she was pregnant and a daughter was born to her. Then her son was born. She finished her college education after that. Her last daughter was born in 2001.

In 2002, the Gujrat riots had impacted the state and the nation. Many were killed ruthlessly and many suffered in the aftermath. She joined in as an activist around this time when some people approached her to contribute to the relief and rehabilitation work. She started going to the camp, a temporary shelter for affected and displaced people. The experience in the camp, the sight of the hapless and the injured and the trauma of women and children changed her life forever.

But it was not easy as her husband objected to her going to the camp. He would say, there are men in the camp, so no need to go. Her daughter was also 8-month-old but she would take her to the camp and work.

She worked with a peace group called the Aman Samuday. There were 240 Aman Pathiks in it who worked for peace and harmony in the post-riot situation. She worked on the rehabilitation of children who had dropped out of the school, she helped families whose homes were burnt. She would visit the family, do the survey of the loss and help them get compensation for that. She got a lot of training from organizations and she got deeply involved in this work. Gradually her work got appreciation and support from all those who had opposed her. Work also started with women. Families did not want to go back to their homes as they were scared. So their counseling and support system was

developed so that they could feel safe going back. Some were able to go back but some did not want to as they were scared and some were not welcome in their original communities. Such families had to be rehabilitated.

A centre was started in between the Hindu and Muslim communities where children from both communities would come together. These children would not talk to each other because of the communal situation. She started to teach them. Gradually she started calling their mothers and gave them employment opportunity. Work started also with men and youth. Many were from the right wing Hindu groups who initially resisted her work. But when they realized that what she is doing is good for all communities, they too joined Aman Samuday. Many children had to be sent to hostels so that their education could continue. Many homes were burnt. Those families had to be rehabilitated.

She was also in the forefront of the struggle against POTA. For this she was put behind bars a number of times. She would lead rallies of 5000 people against the draconian law.

When she joined BMMA, it gave her an opportunity to organize Muslim women. Her exemplary work led to a big movement of Muslim women in Gujarat. Many Muslim women leaders emerged in Gujarat. She regularly attended the quarterly meetings held in various parts of the country. Thousands joined BMMA due to her effort. Many women were affected by the practice of oral divorce, those women joined in big numbers. She started to offer counseling services to women at her centre. Many survivors of triple divorce were counseled by her. She also took a lot of training to understand

the Muslim law, the injunctions of the Quran and the provisions of the constitution. These trainings helped her to understand the issue and encouraged women to protest against the discriminatory practice. The entire national movement worked towards law reforms. Many people appreciated the efforts made by Muslim women. How long can women suffer due to this practice? How long will women be traumatized and left to fend for her own without any support? How long can she be victimized? BMMA organized large public meetings attended by thousands of women who demanded a total abolition of the practice of triple divorce. BMMA then also approached the Supreme Court against the practice. It was opposed by the religious groups. This legal battle also went on for a very long time. Government also realized that what is happening with Muslim women because of the practice of triple divorce, must end. What is written in the Quran never gets conveyed to women. They misguided the women as well as the community and insisted that triple divorce is part of the religion. People and especially women assumed that triple divorce was part of the religious practice. When through trainings they realized that it is not the case, they rose against the religious leaders and demanded an end to the practice.

And it was not easy for Noorjahan. When she counseled women, helped in their rehabilitation, helped counter communal violence, the community and her family supported her. But when she went ahead to demand an end to triple divorce, her own family stood against her. Her husband said, you are going against Islam, you will be thrown out of the community. She says, Muslim women had to fight the battle at three

fronts, at the level of community, especially with religious leaders, with the government and most difficult with the family. BMMA has played a crucial role in facilitating the leadership of the most ordinary women, from districts and even small villages. The leadership was no longer confined to NGO workers. It had spread to smaller towns and villages, in wards, in slums. Women started to fight her own battles within the community and within the family, they understood her rights in the Quran. And finally, the Supreme Court judgment came against triple divorce. While some objected, many supported the law. The law against triple divorce helped men also. They were able to resume their life with their wife if they had uttered divorce in a fit of rage and later regretted. Because this kind of divorce was not legal anymore.

Achievements

She has a long list of achievements. She has helped riot affected people get compensation, fought for legal rights of women, organised rally and dharnas. She has set up an entire movement of Muslim women in the districts of Surat, Rajkot, Baroda, Anand, Sabarkantha, Banaskantha, Ahmedabad, Kutch – in practically all districts Muslim women leaders have emerged.

Inspiration

For many years even after marriage, she had no idea who her neighbours were. Inspite of her education, she was quite unaware. Only when she started working in the relief camp in 2002, that she saw non-Muslim women

working for Muslim women. That set her thinking; if they can work for my community, then can't I work for my own community?

Her mother was orally divorced by her father. She has seen it in her house. Later he regretted. He had said it in anger and did not mean it. But neighbours and relatives got a fatwa saying that now they cannot stay together. That she is *haraam* on him. They took away her mother and made her stay in her brother's house. That time she was married and had 2 children. She was 21 years of age and had no idea about the laws. She went to the maulanas to check and they would all say that the divorce is done, nothing can be done now. They cannot stay together. Then when she joined BMMA and understood the Muslim law, she realised the importance of law for Muslim women. That also inspired her to fight for legal protection for Muslim women within the family. Her mother stayed away from her father her entire life. Later they stayed together in such a way, that he stayed in one room and she stayed in another. Life went like this and that really troubled Noorjahan. BMMA gave her that opportunity to fight for legal rights of women. She vowed that she will not let other women suffer just as her mother has suffered.

She is very inspired by BMMA founder member Zakia Soman. She looks up to her for her leadership and knowledge.

Support from Family

Her name started to come in the media and people started to recognise her. She helped youth who were falsely accused in POTA. Support from family also

started pouring in. Whether it was getting compensation for women, or getting children admitted to school, or helping women get legal aid – her name and her work spread throughout. Her husband would earlier drop her and pick her up from work. Earlier too she never travelled alone with her kids. It would be either her brother or her husband who would pick and drop. But later she started to travel all over the country, all alone. That was a big change that came in. Now the entire family supports her including her husband and her children.

Demotivation

Lack of money and funds pull her down. She has taken a lot of effort and worked very hard for women's empowerment; she faced flak from the community, she faced resistance from family and managed to achieve a lot but now all that is going waste as nothing much can be done without resources. There is a lot of respect and love from the community but that needs to be built up. Even financially not much has changed, the financial condition of the family also needs to become better but there are no funds for that to happen.

Leadership

Whenever any issue happens, people approach her. She has the capability to get the work done. Whenever it is the issue of people's rights, she is always ready to fight. During the NRC opposition, no protest was happening in Juhapura. People were scared that they will be put behind bars for sedition. She took the initiative and organised the programme. She along with other women

were arrested. Inspite of that, the protest continued. She was never scared. Nobody gave her space to even sit for the programme. Lastly they sat near the dargah with just 3 women. In an hour's time, 600 women gathered. This opposition to NRC went on for one and half months with so many women. And these women were the ones who had earlier not even left their homes. Even for buying milk, women don't have milkman coming at the door. The male members of the family bring everything from outside. They leave their homes once a year for eid shopping. And these women were on the roads for such a long time protesting against the NRC/CAA. It is no mean feat to get such sheltered Muslim women to hit the road and carry out long drawn out protests.

The kind of work that she has done in the whole of Gujrat and at the national level, requires a lot of resources. But due to lack of funding she is not able to reach out to those women leaders with whom she can now work more closely. So much needs to be done, but she feels bad that she is not able to continue the good work. She feels that as a lack in her leadership

The biggest risks she has taken was the work against POTA law, against triple divorce practice and the NRC process. She raised her voice against these three. So many times she has been called by the police threatening to put her behind bars but that has not deterred her.

During the COVID 19 lockdown, she is working continuously to provide food to 500 poor families for 2 months at a stretch. Food is coming from a Hindu family in Juhapura. Inspite of the lockdown and the fear of the virus, a Hindu family distributes food in a Muslim

ghetto. Since 2002 till date she has got 30–35 awards for the work done, especially for work done on peace and justice and for her work with children.

Inner Being

‘My work should not stop, if one Noorjahan dies, there should be thousands of Noorjahan to carry forward the work. That is my purpose’.

She wants all women to come forward and take leadership. When she goes to say, Kutch, she does not project herself as a leader, there she wants her Kutch leader to be in the forefront. She must take lead there. She does not want to be in the limelight but wants all women to come forward and lead.

In Himmatnagar, a meeting was organised and about 60–70 girls attended that meeting. Out of these atleast 25 girls said that they want to be like Noorjahan. *Noorjahan apa jaisi himmat chahiye, hame in ke saath hi rahna hai.* [we want to be courageous like Noorjahan apa and always be with her] That really made her cry. She felt overwhelmed. The life that God has given has not gone waste. She has been able to inspire so many women across her state to become leaders. She is getting a lot of love and respect from them and she is already an ideal for them. They all want to be like her, be brave and courageous like her. It does not matter that there are no resources, but a huge wave of women leaders has emerged and that is very important. She still stays in a small house of 10'10 with no bank balance. With fellowship amounts that she got, she managed to get her daughters and son to study.

At the age of 21 she had two children, but her daughter is now 26 and she has not got her married off. She will be married only when she wants to and that is the kind of change that has come in. She has also told her daughter that she is free to have an alliance of her choice, even a court marriage is fine. She is ready to have a lavish dinner after court marriage, she laughs and adds.

Her eldest daughter is a graduate, her son is in IT and an engineer and her youngest daughter has just finished her class 12. She has been staying in Delhi in a hostel from her pre-primary school. During lockdown a Hindu family helped her travel back from Delhi to Ahmedabad.

She is on whats app in her free time. She watches old movies especially patriotic movies.

When she was in her class 10, her close friend tried to commit suicide. She was hanging from her ceiling, there were people at the window but nobody was trying to save her. She went there, broke the door open and with her 10-year-old brother's help got her down, took her to the hospital and saved her. On this act, she got a sound thrashing from her mother and brother, who were worried that this could have landed the whole family in trouble with the police and courts. That really got her scared. Because if the girl dies then even she would be in a soup, managing the court process. Her friend got saved because of her act, but at that moment she was really scared.

10

RAHIMA KHATOON
WEST BENGAL



Personal Information

Her pet name is Renu. They are 6 sisters and 2 brothers. Her father was a primary school teacher. He was also an activist actively working on issues of women's rights and education. In his village he worked a lot on the educational development of the people there. Her village, Khaskhamar is in the Howrah district of Kolkata. It is mostly a Muslim locality but has other communities like scheduled castes and some Hindus. Most people are employed as *zari* workers, some are into agriculture and others are daily wage earners. The area has jute mills and factories where many work as daily laborers. Her mother was from Howrah but her father worked in Bihar in a sugar factory. Her mother was not formally educated but she was very passionate about her children's education. She was a drop out as she had to shift her school to Hindi medium. Rahima's father was the bread earner and her mother looked after the children and focused on their education. Because her father was also so passionate about their education, he insisted that all his girls study well. So Rahima and all of her 5 sisters went to college. 5 out 6 sisters became postgraduates.

The family in which she married was a big joint family. Her father in law had 5 brothers and 7 sisters. All of them were educated. Her father in law was a jute mill worker. She did her B.Ed after marriage so she was encouraged by her in laws also to study further. She stayed in this big joint family for 5 years after marriage. After 5 years they set up their own independent family.

Influences

Her father had started an organization in 1952 called the Tajmahal Library. The Tajmahal in Agra inspired him. She

became a member of that library and would go there to read books. So she was highly inspired by her father who was an activist and a crusader for women's education. Her mother, who though not formally educated, pushed her children into education. Her father had also started a youth team. In summer vacation he would organize youth camp. She would volunteer with him. If he organized an eye camp, she would volunteer and help him organize. Her volunteerism helped her in understanding the issues of the people in her village. Many women would come to her father with issues of domestic violence, which exposed her to harsh realities very soon in life. She would always be with him and he would always inspire her to do this work since her teenage years. She became part of the youth group; she started adult literacy programmes and campaigned for the same on weekends.

She was also very inspired by the Beijing Conference in 1995 where women from across the globe had come together. That experience really increased and bolstered her self-confidence.

Family Support

She married someone who was from the same field. She made it clear right in the beginning that she will continue to work. There were no major challenges within the family but there were people in the village who would tell her mother in law that you have a daughter in law who is working and goes out which is not good. She would also regularly go for trainings, which some people in the village did not like it.

In her father's organization, Tajmahal Library, there were mainly men who managed it. So she along with

her father she started, *Nari-o-Shishu Kalyan Kendra* which is a women's organization. So she is leading that organization right now.

Her husband is also in an NGO and she has two children, a boy and a girl. The boy is doing M.Sc in Chemistry and the girl is in class 10. The children respect her work and in their holidays they also come and participate in events. She has full family support.

Good News Sharing

Any good news that emerges in her work place, she shares it with her team members and any good news or events in her family, she shares with her husband. Since they are part of the same field and they had worked together earlier, she has his full support and cooperation. They discuss issues with each other; share their work with each other.

Achievements

Her biggest achievement at the level of organization was the association with BMMA and the Supreme Court appeal that the organization did against triple divorce. That gave her and the organization a national strength. At the level of her state, her organization received many prestigious awards. She received the Government Of India award for the best grass root level organization. She had also worked tirelessly for 5 years for polio eradication and when India was declared polio free, she was happy that she was able to make a contribution towards that goal. She was also awarded for her work in public health.

Failures

Her frustration comes when she sees women struggling. There is so much that is done for women's empowerment and yet so many women are tortured and abused. Women go to court for justice and there too solution evades her because of constant delays in justice delivery. People think women are safe in the house but actually a woman is not safe in her house because that is where she is abused and tortured the most. Children are sexually abused and troubled in the house and all this makes her sad and frustrated. There is a sense that we have not been able to do much. And women come to the organization with so much of hope that their problem will be resolved. And when the victim feels frustrated, it frustrates her as well. When man marries another woman, the first wife gets frustrated and that troubles her a lot. She asks, when will women become independent? When will she be able to take her own decisions? When will she lead her life as per her own wishes? When will the judicial system change?

Values

She believes in humanity.

Spending Decision

Since both husband and wife are earning, therefore both also share the decisions regarding spending. Both collectively take economic decisions for the family, right from the onset of their married life. Her father had given her land for making a house. That land is her property.

Leadership

She has a very clear vision; she knows what she wants to do. She is very hard working and always puts in a lot of effort in her work. She loves to use all opportunities to the optimum and gets her work done. Because of so many years of experience in the field she has a lot of exposure. She has understood how women from across the globe are coming forward and fighting for their rights. And that has taken her confidence to new heights.

She keeps up her motivation by talking to people who have a positive approach. For e.g. during the triple divorce campaign when there were issues in her village, she was constantly in touch with BMMA leadership for strength and motivation. She connects with people who will support and encourage her and are there for her. If problems happen she does not surrender, nor does she lose hope or get demotivated. She takes steps to keep up her motivation by talking and joining up with friends and colleagues. There are some family members to whom she talks, especially her mother, who peps her up and that gives her the energy to go ahead.

When she hears demotivated people talk, she too gets demotivated. But she steers clear of such people and immediately connects herself to people who think like her and who will inspire her to go ahead in difficult times. There are times when she is frustrated on not being able to achieve her goals.

As a leader she feels she must do better time-management. She needs to look at her long term and short term plan and then manage her time in a way that will help her achieve her goals. That is an important

quality that needs to be strengthened. Sometimes she is not able to complete the task at hand because of her lack of time management skills. She also feels the need to strengthen her fund raising skills because without funds it will be difficult to achieve the goals that she has set for herself. She also wants to improve her social media and IT skills and use that medium to reach out to people. Even her English-speaking skills needs to become better.

She recognizes there are certain barriers in her leadership which emanate from her. She realizes that her documentation skills are poor and as a result a lot of work that happens around livelihood, legal rights, domestic violence etc. does not get documented and hence not placed before the world to see.

Another barrier is lack of reading. As leaders she says we all must read so much, gain more knowledge, understand the world better and develop expertise. But lack of reading habits work as a barrier. In order to work effectively on any issue one must have loads of knowledge about the issue.

When the triple divorce issue was being fought, challenges emerged there. When she took signatures against the practice, she was not opposed. But when the case went right up to the Supreme Court and later in the Parliament, the opposition began. She was asked to close down her organization. The community was misled by saying that she is going against Islam, that she is stopping the process of divorce completely. In such difficult times, she got a lot of support from the founder members of BMMA. She shared the training material with people who opposed her, showed them the petition, she did small meetings in the community, answered all their

queries and questions and doubts, made leaflets – after so much of effort finally the community was convinced that what she is doing is right and it is only going to benefit the community.

The biggest risk was to go on working against the practice of triple divorce. She was asked to close down her organization; women were not allowed to come out of the house. And inspite of this risk, she did not lose hope. In fact she was more fired up, her motivation actually increased and she decided to go ahead with the issue no matter what. In fact a lot of work happened after that. The motivation to go on came from group solidarity. She never felt alone or excluded. She was not the only one doing it. All the state leaders of BMMA were involved fully in it and were part of the campaign. There was solidarity and support and strength, which she got from her team members. The strong bond and emotional attachment with each other gave her the strength. The public hearing of the victims of triple divorce, the publication of their stories – all these programmes and activities also strengthened her resolve to go ahead. There is strength in unity and fighting together. Also when we are part of the group, we contribute through our strengths. Someone writes better, someone is good with social media, someone is good with organizing meetings and events. Thus each one contributes to the cause.

One of the most memorable incidents has been introducing non-traditional livelihood opportunity for women. Women have been trained to drive autorickshaw. It is a deeply satisfying experience. Many Muslim women have also joined in this training. There was a time when women never left their homes, but now

they are going outside, educating themselves, earning for themselves and taking up non-traditional livelihood options. It is heartening to see when they earn money and share with her their dreams about educating their children.

Inner Being

She is deeply satisfied with her life. She has been able to contribute to people's lives; she has a family, a home. Her philosophy is simple. How many ever years she lives she wants to contribute and help. If she cannot do anything good, then atleast she should not do anything bad.

She wants people to remember her. Her father did a lot of good work and people remember him. In this time of corona virus pandemic, people still remember him as someone who would have done so much good work. When people die, nobody speaks badly about them, but I want people to tell the truth. She also wants to work further on codification of law and wants to gain success there as well. She wants legislation against polygamy, halala as per the Quranic injunctions and values.

When she sees women going to school, college, working and being happy, that makes her happy. When women get equal opportunity, she gets a smile on her face. There should be equality and respect for all. Men should stop dominating women – these are the dreams that she wants to work for.

She loves Rabindra Sangeet. Sad songs make her cry, patriotic songs make her cry; she thinks of those people sacrificed their lives for the country.

On days when she feels down and out, she thinks of all those people who are in a bad shape, much worse, facing so many challenges. So when they can do it, why can't I? That really gets her out of her bed on a bad gloomy day!!

She is not really scared of anything but public speaking in front of a big crowd really scares her and she also gets doubtful sometimes about her knowledge. When she is not very well informed her confidence goes down. There was a time when she was scared of the *maulvis* but not now. She would always think they know better but after gaining knowledge herself, she is super confident to face them.

She feels extremely proud of herself when in her counseling centre, she is able to resolve cases and is able to bring smile on the face of the woman. A lot of men come to the centre for counseling and some of them are scared of her. She feels proud of herself for doing what is right and what needs to be done. Also when families face so many problems and if she is able to do even one little bit to help them, they pray and give blessings. That really brings a smile of satisfaction and a sense of deep pride in the work done by her and her team.

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QAZI SAFIA AKHTAR MADHYA PRADESH



Personal Information

Safia has two sons and one daughter. All three are married. Elder son is in Bangalore, a southern city of India and is a manager in HSBC bank. Her younger son is in Reliance. Her husband was working in a cooperative bank but because of ill health, he took voluntary retirement. Daughter in laws are also working in school as teachers. Everyone in the family supports her.

Her mother was a homemaker. Her father was a landowner [*jagirdaar*] in Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh. He was an honorary magistrate and also a contractor. They were 4 sisters and one brother.

Work for the truth and help people fight for their rights-this was something which was deeply ingrained in her and which she received it from her father. Lot of people say that she has got the fighting spirit from him. She was very sensitive right from childhood; she was unable to see poverty and destitution. There were times when she would cry seeing the horrible conditions of people around her. She lost her father when she was just a month old. After his death, her mother shifted to Bhopal as the environment there was much more conducive for the children. Inspite of being a single woman, she ensured that all children got good education and a good upbringing for which she had to struggle a lot. She sold of the land and with that money she managed the household expenses and their education as well. Safia's sister did intermediate, brother did double MA and Safia did her MA.

Safia's mother grounded her in religious education. There would be discussions around the house about religion and related matters. They would also discuss the

problems faced by Muslim women and how and what can be done to ameliorate their conditions. She strongly felt that what is right must be done and what is wrong must be abandoned.

Safia's education was not easy. She completed her class 4 and then had to leave studies. She studied two years in the house and then appeared for matric exam, which had Urdu as supplementary. She got a distinction. Then she did her college, did her BA and then did MA. After BA also she faced difficulties. There were two colleges in Bhopal then, one was a girl's college and the other one was a co-ed college. The girl's college did not offer MA. Her brother was doing his MA in the co-ed college. But he did not want her to take admission there. So she went on a hunger strike, and insisted that she wants to do her MA, even if it means going to a co-ed college. But luckily from that year the girl's college introduced post-graduation classes and she was able to join there. She wanted to do MA in political science but her brother insisted that she did MA in Urdu. She could not refuse him so she did her post-graduation in Urdu. Her name got into the merit list and the thesis, which she had written, got her the highest marks in the university. She was always interested in studies and the years she spent in college were her golden years.

And her fight for rights began during this phase. She shares one instance where one of her favourite professors, who considered her his sister, got transferred. He did not want a transfer and even the students did not want him to go. So she got together a delegation of students and met the education minister. The minister refused to listen to them. To which she insisted and declared that she will not go till she gets the order in her

hands cancelling his transfer. She also demanded if the transfer is not cancelled they will reach out to the media. That worked and he canceled the order of transfer and sent them back to college in his vehicle. When the professor got the cancelation order, he broke down. He said he always missed having a sister and there she is in the form of Safia Akhtar. He continued to be in touch with her. So the spirit to fight for what is right and just was something which she had it in her.

Work Information

After MA she worked in a school and then as a lecturer in Career College. After marriage she shifted out of Bhopal with her husband and left her job. After her children were born she felt that she must focus her energies on her children's upbringing and education. She taught them till class 8. And then they carried on with their studies.

In 1985 there were around 85 anganwadis in Bhopal. Anganwadi is a government managed centre to combat child hunger and malnutrition. She started an anganwadi in her own house. When she started working on this issue she realized how the anganwadi workers are exploited and paid such a meager amount. In 1986 an anganwadi workers training was held. Here she encountered one of her first instances of communal bias against the Muslim community. One trainer said that Muslim anganwadi workers are thieves, they sell the bread and milk meant for poor children and she started calling Muslim areas as Pakistan. Safia took up this matter with the minister and insisted on meeting the CM. She met the CM and told him that they do

not want an officer who is so communal. Anganwadi workers belong to all religions, it is not appropriate of the officer to isolate Muslim anganwadi workers and spread the communalism virus. She insisted within 2 days the said officer should be transferred. And she was transferred.

CITU, Centre of Trade Unions, also had an anganwadi union. They contacted her and asked her to be part of the union. And insisted that she be made the president. She told them she fights her own battle and she is a union in herself. She does not need them but since they are insisting she will work with them. So she was made the president of the anganwadi union. Soon she was joint secretary of CITU.

Later at the time of the release of model *nikahnama* [Muslim marriage document] by the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, she was also the district president of All India Democratic Women's Association. That time she had opposed the *nikahnama* as it did not have anything new. It is only a *nikahnama* with no *iqrarnama* [list of conditions] There is no provision for the couple or woman to lay down her conditions. She felt AIDWA used her for opposing the model *nikahnama* because beyond that they had nothing substantial to offer to Muslim women.

While she was still in AIDWA, she joined BMMA. They were unhappy with her when she joined BMMA. She was told that such movements start and finish, they don't last forever. With BMMA she felt she had an opportunity to work on the issues of Muslim women. Also Arabic was one of her languages in BA, so she felt she is in a better position to understand the Quran. She

had also given *Diniyad* [about religion] exams. She was able to understand better as to what is mentioned in the Quran and what is happening in the society. She was also looking for a platform where she would be able to reach out to people with a better understanding of Islam. BMMA gave her that platform.

Influencers

Her mother became a widow at a young age of 30. After Safia's father's death, the family shifted to Bhopal. There were no relatives here and no support. She saw her mother brought them up in such difficult times. She was also worried that her sons may fall in bad company in the absence of a father. She took a lot of pain to bring them up and give them a good education. Her mother's strength in the face of adversity influenced her.

Whenever Safia saw anyone in distress, she would cry. She was never able to bear the distress of others. When she would see beggars on the street, she would come back home and cry and share the distress with her mother. So she had sensitivity, affection for others and a need to do something for others. As she grew up she saw the lives of women closely, of how they are controlled by men. At some point in time, she was the president of the angwanwadi union. In meetings she would see the husband of the anganwadi worker coming in and in front of all women, would scream and shout at her. At such times she would be distressed and wonder, does a woman not have her dignity and self-respect? How can a man abuse a woman like that? She would be troubled to see women working so much and yet not

getting compensated. These experiences got added to her sensitivity. She wanted to do something for them. She would also talk to the men, saying that women also have their dignity and self-respect. She would say, you cannot scream and shout at her in public. She is your wife and she has a right to be treated well by you. Around the same time, Safia would also come across women who were divorced or whose husbands had married again. Most of her maids were those women whose husband had remarried. Such women would then work and manage their life and their children.

She had a friend who had done MA in Arabic and a gold medalist and also a lecturer. Safia would discuss with her about Quranic injunctions on divorce, women's rights, polygamy etc. Because she was a post graduate in Arabic, she knew the Quran and she would tell her that triple divorce has no place in the holy text. It is the mentality that needs to change where a man thinks it is his right to have more than one wife. And changing mentality will take time.

These influences gave her the strength to argue and debate with people who would justify these practices. Even when she would be alone in a debate facing a barrage of men on the panel, she would still debate and argue with them. Since men would not have any reasonable answer to her points of debate, they would eventually use their last defense and say that women are not intelligent, *unki akl unke ghutnon me hoti hai*. [their wisdom lies in their knees]. She would not let go of them still. She would demand a proof that indeed a woman's wisdom lies in her knees. Because irrespective of gender, wisdom of any person is in the brain. There would be no logical answer to this, so the men would say this is the

tradition which they have heard since generations. Since you cannot prove it, she would say, then you are wrong.

On joining BMMA she felt that now her dream of doing something for women, of addressing her injustices, can be fulfilled. Even she would truly believe that triple divorce is a valid form of divorce. She did not go in the details deeply and she had not read the Quran in translation so had no idea about what was written. She would always wonder how come Allah has allowed this instant divorce and reducing a woman to penury. In BMMA training she got the answer and that gave her a direction and a platform to work on her objective of working with women.

Values

Values of the constitution are also the values that must inspire her work. She believes in equality and justice. She believes that all unjust practices must go away. She believes we must continue to address the injustices and inequalities faced by all, especially Muslim women. Referring to the *ulemas* [people having knowledge of religion], she says, they think of themselves as leaders of the religion but they are ones who make laws based on their own whims. These laws or practices have no reference to the Quran or to the *hadis* [traditions of Prophet Mohammed]. These practices must be abolished and those, which emanate from the Quran, must be adhered to. Who are these clerics to make laws, which violate Quranic values and principles?

Many people opposed her by saying that she gave preference to Quran over hadis. She answers, that hadis was compiled after 200 years of Prophet's death. Many

zaeef hadis are narrated. How can one accept those? Only those hadis, which are in compliance with the Quran, can be accepted. Somebody sent her a hadis, which said that if God had permitted anyone to be worshiped after him, it would be the husband. To them she replied, if it was such an important rule, then why was it not mentioned in the Quran? The concept of bowing only before God is so strong in Islam, how come this hadis has no resonance in the Quran? According to her, if God had ever permitted any prostration after him, it would have been the mother. Because Islam has given high place to a mother, more than anyone else. How can a women worship a man who is violent, alcoholic and a criminal? God has created women and men as equal. People have labeled her as Ahle-Quran and not Ahle-Hadis. To which she says she is both. There are some very strong and pro-women hadises. For instance, a woman named Jameela came to the Prophet and demanded separation from her husband. Prophet did not force her to stay on and undertook the process of khula. She finds this hadis resonating in the Surah Bakar of the Quran. Safia says, 'God has given us wisdom; we can think and secondly, we have the language to express ourselves. Quran keeps insisting that we use our wisdom, our power to think and reflect'.

Achievement

When she started awareness campaigns, women were very happy. Before the trainings, they did not know anything about their rights. They just followed what was told to them by the *maulanas*. Earlier women would quietly sit at home if they were divorced orally. Now with awareness they are confident to raise their voice against

the practice. With awareness and confidence, women went right up to the Supreme Court. The entire BMMA team needs to take credit for the awareness that women gained and fought for their rights. Getting that Quranic right for women was a big achievement for her.

Failures

There have been instances where she had wanted to do things but was not able to do it. She wanted to help many women who had approached her to get divorce, but was not able to, as the qazi would insist that the woman go to the court for seeking divorce. How to help such women, would be her worry always.

Many people threatened her when she started working on these issues. She had organized a public hearing on the issue of triple divorce. After the hearing she was threatened by the conservative forces. They told her that like Taslima Nasreen and Salman Rushdie she will need police protection. *'Tumhe unki tarah sangeen ke saaye me jeena padega!'* She was accused of changing the *shariat*. Even now she keeps facing these hurdles created by religious groups. But she believes that the fight must go on inspite of all difficulties.

As a trained qazi she also faced difficulties. Inspite of being qualified and being able to do a better job, she was not able to function as a qazi. After becoming a qazi she got her nephew married on the BMMA nikahnama. But the qaziat refused to acknowledge that nikaah. Her nephew was asked to do the nikaah again. The qaziat did not recognize or acknowledge the woman qazi. It is not easy to change the mindset of the people. When women

ask men, give us one reason why women cannot become a qazi? Instead of giving an answer, they pose a question. Have any women become an *imam*, has any woman been sent by God as a messenger/rasool? So how can women become a qazi? Till this mindset changes, it will be difficult for the people like Safia to bring about reforms. She considers this as her failure that she has not been able to convince the society that women are capable and women can do a much better job than a male qazi. For instance, BMMA's nikaahnama has an Iqrarnama, which is a list conditions that both parties can put to each other at the time of marriage. That is an essential requirement of a Muslim marriage, which is a social contract between two people. But none of the qazis have this document attached to the nikaahnama.

Family Support

She was the youngest in the family. She was a month old when her father expired. They were two brothers and one sister. They loved her immensely. They would support her views and would be happy to hear her thoughts on these issues. They would encourage her to fight out this battle whenever opportunity came her way. The maternal family fully supported her. Even her marital family supported her. They were all highly educated, many were doctors. Not just for her debating skills and her knowledge, but she was also appreciated and acknowledged to be a good wife and a mother and a homemaker. She was very polite and good to talk to others. She really worked hard and looked after her in laws. She served them well. Even in her marital family, she was the youngest. Her husband had 3 elder brothers.

She was the most loved daughter in law. One of her brother in law is a doctor; other is a government officer. They would guide her when she was the President of the anganwadi union. They encouraged and supported her. Her husband has been the pillar of her strength. He supported her for everything that she did. He did not stop her but in fact encouraged her. For her anganwadi work, she was required to travel to government offices with her co-workers. Such times he would tell her not to make them spend any money. Her children also supported her and were proud of her achievements.

Leadership

She has got her leadership instincts from her father. He was very active in his village. So much so that even now in his village, people remember him. Even today if someone is not well, they go to his grave, take his mitti and put in a cloth and hang it around the neck for healing. This is the 3rd or the 4th generation of that village and yet they know everything about her father. When she had gone there, she got so much love and respect from them even now. He is still remembered for his good deeds. If the person is bad, nobody remembers and gives so much of respect. So she has inherited that leadership quality from her father.

Even in college she was active. She went to education minister for stalling the transfer of a popular teacher. She was not scared of that authority. When she joined anganwadi, she realized how badly the workers are treated. The authorities make them do a lot of work other than their main responsibility. She fought for them. Some government officials would call Muslim ghettos as

Pakistan and they would accuse the Muslim anganwadi workers of these ghettos of theft. She challenged those officers and got them transferred. Anganwadis had women from all communities. The government cannot discriminate and accuse on the basis of religion. In another instance, one member of her anganwadi was sent to do work almost 10 kms away. She did not have money to come back and she also lost consciousness on her way back. Safia filed a complaint against the officer who sent her without adequately preparing her for that. She also complained against an officer who would make anganwadi worker do work which required the workers to spend from their meagre salary of Rs. 250/. She regularly protested against the quality of meal that the anganwadis would get. She would never distribute such food which had worms in it. When she protested the government stopped sending food to her centre. An inquiry was initiated against her that she does not run the centre. But nobody was interested in knowing why the centre was not running. Inspite of the pressure from the government she refused to distribute substandard food to the anganwadi children. But she continued her protests. While other workers would be docile and take instructions without questioning, she would not. She fought for herself and for others whenever any wrong was done. She no longer works in the anganwadi but other workers still remember her for all the work that she did.

Most significant barrier in her leadership is her inability to raise resources for the work. She needs a team to work and for the sustenance of team, resources are required. A lot of women volunteers want to work with her but it is difficult to sustain their interest without

any monetary support. She does not have a registered organization of her own, nor is she associated with any big organization. She wants to sometimes start an organization of her own but it is difficult as it requires a lot of time and effort and a lot of government compliances, which at the age of 60 she does not want to get into.

Inner Being

At the time of this interview Safia was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and was busy distributing dry ration to score of poor and needy families. She believes God chose her to do this work during such difficult times. She was born not just to lead one's own life, to have all the luxuries and be comfortable but to help others, to alleviate their poverty and to help them get justice.

It is always said that if you do good work then people will always remember you for the good that you have done. And if you do bad things then people will remember you for the bad you have done. She wants people to remember her for her good work. In connection with BMMA, she believes that people will remember her for her specific contribution to women's rights. Women who were deprived, who were fighting bitter battles, who were facing injustice, Safia was the one who reached out to them. People will remember her for her shayris [couplets]. Safia is a connoisseur of good poetry/shayri. She always has one for every occasion. In all BMMA meetings, she has a special job to do and that is to share her shayris with the team.

She is an ideal daughter who lived up to the expectation of her mother who wanted her to study, be good to people and do good to people. Her mother

is also her role model who took pains to bring up her 4 children. Safia became what her mother wanted her to become. Similarly, when she got married, she wanted to be an ideal daughter in law. And she did that too, so much so that all her marital family members love and respect her a lot. Her husband says that he cannot repay to her in the manner that she looked after his parents. Nothing can be done to compensate for her love and service to them. So whatever work Safia took up, she tried to be the best in it and to be a good human being and do good to others. As she has led her life in the service of others, she is glad that she can see that spirit in her children who are always in the forefront to help the poor and the needy.

When she does something for someone, that brings her immense joy and at such times she loves her God so much. She is glad at such times that she is chosen to do good to others. During the corona pandemic, she got so busy through the day, that she forgot to eat. She worked late nights and was so happy helping others that she even forgot that there is a pandemic. So whenever she has helped, reached out to others, that has brought in not just a smile, but her heart bloomed with happiness.

She loves ghazals, sufi sangeet, shero shayri, especially of Ghulam Ali and Iqbal banu.

And she has a long list of things that make her tear up. First being her mother. Whenever she thinks of her mother, she tears up. Her mother liked chikoo a lot, so whenever she sees it, she thinks of her. There was a time when her mother had to manage the 4 children with a monthly support of Rs. 60/, a pair of clothes for her 4 children and their school fees. Other than these expenses

her mother managed everything. She started to stitch clothes and never bought a new dress for herself. Her sacrifice is what brings tears to her eyes.

Whenever as a child, she saw a poor person, a beggar, she would cry a lot. Today also when she sees someone very troubled, she cries.

Her husband loves her a lot. So ghazals like, *zindagi me to sabhi pyaar kiya karte hai, main to mar kar bhi meri jaan tumhe chahunga*, tear her up. She is happy for the fact that she has a husband who loves her so much, looks after her. For e.g. she has a maid coming in, but since her husband had cancer, he cannot eat roti which is not freshly cooked and soft. So she makes roti for him, fresh, just before eating time. But she has spondylitis, so she has pain in her shoulders. To help her, her husband makes the dough for her, so that she can make fresh rotis for him. Such is their love. So whenever she hears deep romantic ghazals, she tears up.

She is never really scared of anything but yes, she is scared about what will happen to the country and to the Muslims if the current situation continues. Otherwise she has been very daring and fearless. When she had done her first public hearing, there were reports in the newspaper that she will be treated on par with Tasleema Nasreen and Salman Rushdie and that a fatwa will be passed against her and she will be expelled from Islam. When this news came in that time, she was worried but not for herself but for her children and her family. The mufti of the area is known to be a goon. He can go to any extent to harm anyone who opposes him. But even that never scared her. Inspite of those threats she continues to do her work till date.

She is proud of the fact that she is a Muslim, although she is neither an expert nor perfect.

She is proud of her mother. She brought her up in a way that she grew up to be knowledgeable. Her mother would give her knowledge about religion in a very informal way. There are a set of prayers to be done after azaan. Her mother would recite those prayers aloud while she would go about doing her chores in the house. She would never tell her children to recite but just by reciting loudly she would ensure that they learn it just by listening. She says, her mother turned her into a person who is today capable of doing something substantial in her life.

She is also very proud of the all the BMMA team members. The IG once called her to say that BMMA has raised voice on those issues about which nobody cared. She felt so much pride then. She is proud of the fact that the kind of work done by BMMA is appreciated by all. Also, whenever she is able to resolve a family dispute and the couple are able to go back after reconciliation, she is very happy and proud of herself that she managed to save a family from breaking up.



CO-FOUNDERS



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ZAKIA SOMAN



Zakia Soman was born to educationist parents in the walled city of Ahmedabad. She is the eldest of four siblings comprising three sisters and one brother. Her father, Prof. Nizami was a well-known person who participated in activism through Adhyapak Mandal which was a strong association of college teachers at the time. Zakia had a normal childhood studying in different Gujarati medium schools. All the four siblings studied well and today are placed in positions across the world.

Growing up, Zakia had the good fortune of being part of large maternal and paternal families. She was deeply influenced by her Nani [maternal grandmother] who was a teacher at the municipal girls' school. Her mother, Zakia's great-grand mother had been the head mistress of the village school in Bharuch district. Nani was mother of nine children and Zakia received lot of warmth and affection from five aunts and three uncles all of whom were sportsperson playing volleyball, basketball and mountaineering. Nani was a loving, humane and independent minded person who loved to travel whenever she got an opportunity. In those days, she travelled alone to Kashmir, Himachal and other places. She was a deeply religious person but unlike most religious persons known to Zakia, she had a very intimate relationship with Allah. She loved talking aloud to Allah and some of her words have stayed in Zakia's memory. She was a great Sufi believer and loved to spend time at different dargahs and shrines. She loved to take along her grandchildren to her favourite dargahs such as Piran Pir, Shah Alam and Sarkhej Roza where she would pray and converse with the Pirs as the children would play around. After retirement, she was a regular visitor

at Ajmer Sharif and Haji Ali dargah in Bombay. During vacations the children gathered around Nani for Sindbad and other stories. Nani's graphic descriptions painted a picture in Zakia's mind about wondrous distant lands, some of which she got to visit during adult life. Nani would read aloud from Blitz which was her favourite paper and comment on world affairs. Sometimes others around would react to her behavior but she was not the one to be silenced by anybody's criticism. For Zakia, her nani [maternal grandmother] is her all-time hero.

Zakia's childhood was a mix of different experiences. Her parents were strict disciplinarians and being the eldest Zakia had to bear the brunt of their ire regularly. She was often the target of her mother's anger without any fault. But she was happy to play and generally spend time with her siblings. Her father, a college principal, would bring home a bunch of books on the last day of the term. This would keep Zakia and her siblings busy with books throughout the long and hot summer vacations in Ahmedabad.

Religiosity

Zakia's parents were not overtly religious in their day-to-day life. They were forced to live in a Muslim society following the many riots in the city but they had friends and colleagues from a cosmopolitan background. The milieu at home was not religious or rather it was without any visible religious markers. The services of a maulana were arranged to teach Quran to the children but as luck would have it the young maulana was a liberal-minded person who was interested in reading the textbooks and other books found in the house. Zakia remembers her

father rebuking the masjid keeper for the loud noise from the speakers during exam times when children were supposed to be busy preparing.

During the growing up years her parents were not namazis. Rozas were not compulsory for anyone. The mother was very particular about distributing zakat and fitra without fail. Normally, there was a huge celebration on Ramzan Eid with friends and relatives pouring in throughout the day. The children always got new pairs of cloths for Eid.

Diwali was a looked forward to festival for mainly two reasons. Their mother got them a huge supply of crackers to burst throughout the Diwali holidays. Another was the cherished visits to the homes of different friends on Bestu Varsh [Gujarati New Year] with delicious treats awaiting. We spoke a mix of languages at home – Gujarati, Hindi with some Urdu words and English. Both parents were teachers of English language and literature. Zakia was impressed with her father for the way he recited poetry.

Things changed somewhat in the later years when her brother turned religious and father became a Tablighi. Both her parents have performed Haj multiple times.

Difficult Times Leading to Rebirth

After finishing graduation from St Xaviers' College, Zakia enrolled for masters in English Literature. She simultaneously started appearing for bank recruitment exams. In the days prior to economic liberalization bank jobs were considered very good in India. She got selected

and joined a bank job. At the time, she came across a man with whom she fell in love. She was 21 years old and the man was 33. Her family objected to the relationship as the man was older and also a divorcee. Zakia was simple, pure hearted and unaware of larger realities of life and relationships. She “eloped” from home and married this person against all the wishes and advice of her family. She had no clue about what life had in store for her.

It proved to be a disastrous step as the husband turned out to be extremely dominating and abusive. He did not want Zakia to work or study further. She resigned from the bank and dropped out from the masters’ program. At the time, she was not aware of gender rights or concepts such as equality and justice. She had not heard about patriarchy or feminism or human rights. But she did have a strong sense of right and wrong. She did have her own likes and dislikes. She had her own feelings and ideas about how she wanted her life to be. She realized early on that her wishes and dreams are of no consequence. She was too proud and was in a dilemma about going back to her family whom she had so openly defied. She realized that the only way forward was to be an obedient wife. She was forced to cut off relations with her family on the grounds that “they rejected your husband”.

The silver lining for Zakia was the birth of her son Arastu within a year of marriage. Today, she draws tremendous strength and satisfaction from the way he has turned out to be a loving and sensitive young man.

Zakia put her son in playgroup when he was two and half years old and resumed her studies. This was

not easy as her husband would not allow it on so many pretexts. Her sister Huma stood by her in those difficult years when she completed her Masters as well as M.Phil and acquired other professional qualifications. She began working again and went on to be an editor, manager, director, college faculty and so on. All of this was done in the face of tremendous barriers put in her way by the person she was married to. Rather than celebrate the fact that a mother and a home maker was able to achieve so much she was always made to feel guilty. She was made to pay the price for being “allowed” to go out of the home and pursue her interests. Looking back, she feels that she wasted the prime of her life over the whims and fancies of a patriarchal hegemon. She feels sad for the suffering it caused to her son in his childhood and later on during his growing up years.

Zakia’s life was a rollercoaster ride with some ups and many downs. She was a prisoner of marriage. She underwent emotional abuse and physical abuse without ever talking about it to anyone. She maintained a smiling face. Years later, a famous film personality told her that she was one of the “greatest actresses in real life”. She became a classical case of life under patriarchal control and hegemony. She was so subsumed by this order that she would introduce herself as “I am Mrs...” never referring to her first name.

But it ended on 4th April, 2003 when Zakia walked out of her marriage along with her son. Life has turned out to be beautiful for her ever since. Arastu has turned out to be a fine young man. Zakia is now married to a loving and caring person. She has worked on a range of issues in India and in South Asia. She has learnt many

new things and is still learning. She has met several co-travelers in her journey who have enriched her understanding and worldview. Today, she lives her life on her own terms and enjoys the journey.

Communal Riots

Ahmedabad has continued to be home for Zakia. It is her birthplace and it is the place where she began her activism post the Gujarat riots of 2002. She had not planned to be a social activist at all. She was catapulted into it by circumstances. Although riots are nothing new for Gujarat and for Zakia personally. One of the most vivid memories for Zakia is the burnt down home of her Dadi [paternal grandmother] in Tankshal ni Pole in Ahmedabad. It so happened that her Dadi's home fell at the "border" – a geographical location in Ahmedabad where a Hindu locality ends and a Muslim locality begins. Gujarat is known for communal divide and ghettoized living for many decades now. Her Dadi's home has been ransacked and burnt down several times during various riots including in 1969 and some other years. In the morning hours the curfew would be lifted for women and children to buy necessities such as milk, vegetables etc. During the curfew lifting hours Zakia's mother would quickly make a trip to her Dadi's home to assess the extent of damage. Often Zakia and her brother would accompany their mother on these quick assessment trips. Typically, as recounted by Zakia, the entrance door would be burnt down and she could smell the air filled with charred household items. The windows would be broken, the furniture would be burnt down and what cannot be burnt [such as grills] would be

damaged or moulded in an apparent effort to break it. Her Dadi would come to her home during the riots and would wait to hear the account from her daughter in law [Zakia's mother] about her own home. Her chacha and phupis [uncles and aunts] were too traumatized to visit their home and preferred Zakia's mother to go and find out the extent of damage.

Zakia grew up hearing about the riots and reading about the riots in newspapers. Yet her own consciousness was not formed by these occurrences in a major way. Her parents had moved into Azad Society locality of western Ahmedabad in 1980. There were many projects underway led by the Gujarat Housing Board and several of them were the favorites of the university community. Her father's friends and colleagues convinced him to move there. It was a welcome move for her secular minded family. They lived happily for ten years till 1990 when L K Advani undertook the Somnath rathyatra in the run-up to the Ram temple at Ayodhya agitation. This led to a show of strength by the nascent BJP and several small riots took place across Gujarat. The Nizamis' home was burnt down in a pre-meditated attack. All the colleagues who were friends and neighbours could not prevent it. The police were nowhere to be seen. For Zakia's father life had come full circle. From walled city to Muslim society to cosmopolitan Azad Society. Her father dared to live in a non-Muslim place despite his mother's experience of losing her home to every riot! So much for the allegation that Muslims refuse to integrate into the national mainstream! Her father dared to integrate and paid a price! He retired the following year in 1991 and was now forced back to the ghetto. He could not have afforded the risk of integration any more.

When the riots began on 28th February, 2002, Zakia was in the middle of dealing with her own domestic hell. The sheer brutality of the violence and the total refusal by police and administration to intervene was astounding for her. There was curfew all over and news about killings and mob attacks were coming in. Zakia and her husband decided to collect food, cloths, medicines etc. for the riot affected families. The neighbours contributed generously and there were four carloads of materials to be distributed. Zakia and some others reached the relief camp in Chartoda Kabristan in Gomtipur. Zakia was unaware that this would be a life changing trip for her.

Thereafter Zakia went to the relief camp everyday. She talked to the women, men and children who were displaced and forced to take shelter in the cemetery. Gradually Zakia had started working with them for relief, rehabilitation, legal help, children's education etc. Zakia came in close contact with some riot survivor women and got deeply influenced by their plight. She was very impressed with the way the women were fighting against all odds. They were mostly women from deprived economic backgrounds and with little formal education. And yet their resolve and their courage to fight back were awe inspiring for Zakia. She heard them say, "we want justice", "what is our fault that we are being punished?", "we are citizens of this country; why can't we get justice?" "We want justice from the Supreme Court", "we want to approach the parliament"! For Zakia, this was like first-hand introduction to democratic ideals. Without realizing it, Zakia was changing. Within months, she decided that she would not continue in the abusive relationship of marriage.

Zakia realized much later how deeply the riot survivor women from deprived social and economic backgrounds had inspired her. For her, they were truly the saviours! She felt ashamed of her own inaction and complacence when she saw the women fighting against horrible odds. It was the moment Zakia's life changed. She decided to say no to dominance and abuse. She decided to take charge of her own life.

Zakia went on to join Aman Samudaya, a community of peace and justice where she met several courageous women and men who were riots survivors striving now for harmony and joining hands against communalism and social division.

Women for Peace & Justice

Although Zakia had no formal training in social science or social behavior she was fortunate to join the movement against communalism and for peace in the company of several fellow Gujaratis and fellow Indians. In 2005, Zakia came across yet another tremendous opportunity to learn and contribute to society when she joined Action Aid. It provided her the perfect platform to broaden her understanding on various social issues and become part of a larger national platform for justice and equality for all. Aman Samudaya was growing in the state and Aman Pathiks were becoming known for the message of peace, religious tolerance and harmony. She had the good fortune of the close friendship of Mukul Sinha and Nirjhari Sinha with whom the Gujarat Jan Andolan was formed. It raised a voice for peace, justice and for resistance to communalism.

The Gujarat Jan Andolan brought out ordinary women, both Muslim and Hindu, together for peace and against communal forces. Several public hearings, meetings and rallies were organized in various cities of Gujarat as well as in Delhi and some other cities. For Zakia, it was a moving experience to see burqa-clad Muslim women leading public rallies and deposing in the peoples' tribunal against the draconian POTA which was organized by HRLN in Delhi. Zakia learnt a lot by working with Prof. Babu Mathew whom she considers a friend and mentor. She started understanding the need for people across south Asia to come together in the fight against poverty and injustice and to uphold peace in the region. She became part of SAAPE, a south Asian regional body to build peoples' alliance against poverty. A huge contingent of women participated in the Peoples' SAARC in Kathmandu in 2006 and later on in Colombo. In 2007, over 500 women from different states participated in the program *Sarhadein ab Nahin* in Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar calling for a peaceful South Asia and world. In 2008, Zakia presented on the status of minorities to the UN Committee to Review Human Rights in Geneva.

Zakia got the opportunity of working closely with the Sachar Committee when it was formed by the then PM in 2005. She travelled extensively throughout the country and interacted with individuals and groups who were working on citizenship rights of minorities and particularly Muslims. Under the aegis of Action Aid she led a national study on the socio-economic condition of Muslims which was acknowledged by the Sachar Committee. After seven years of this study another study to assess the change in the situation if any, was carried out and released as *Broken Promises*.

Throughout her work, Zakia saw first-hand the commitment and readiness of women to be part of social change. Some of the riot affected women later began to talk about issue like triple talaq, polygamy etc. This led to the formation of informal Niswan group in Ahmedabad in 2003. Some years later in 2007, this would lead to the formation of BMMA as a national platform.

BMMA, An Important Landmark

The journey to the formation and the birth of BMMA is an important landmark for Zakia. She was comfortable being secular and being Muslim at once. Her experiences in Gujarat riots made her mindful of her Muslim identity and she felt the burden of being singled out. Although this was not new for her but it become a turning point for her in 2003. She was fortunate to meet and befriend many women who happened to be Muslim and like-minded with their belief in secular democratic ideals.

Post 9/11 terrorist attacks and the so-called war on terror, things changed globally for Muslim societies and individuals. Events following the Gujarat riots led to the discussions on Muslim identity in India. There were several myths and ideas concerning Muslim. But we, the Muslim women were interested in talking about Muslim as equal citizens and Muslim as human beings. We were particularly concerned about the equal rights and concerns of women. The Sachar Committee had unequivocally brought out the facts about Muslim marginalization, poverty, educational backwardness, economic deprivation and communal violence. Although they did not study the conditions of women,

they noted the enthusiasm in girls and women about education and towards economic independence.

Some of us who were discussing the possibilities of coming together of Muslim women as a national platform were mindful of the condition of the community. We felt that we need to demand accountability from the government and from the community leadership which was all male. We felt we needed to reiterate our belief in democracy and the Constitutional ideals and play an active role in community affairs and in national affairs. We were mindful of the stranglehold of orthodox patriarchal elements over the community. We were angry at the lip sympathy paid to secularism by pandering to male conservatives. We realized the threat posed by communal forces was real and had experienced the havoc first-hand. We felt the need for women's leadership and solidarity as a response to the prevailing situation.

Being women, we were fully aware of the old trick about use of religion to further patriarchal norms and practices. We had known women suffering owing to misinterpretations leading to practices such as instant triple talaq, polygamy, early marriage etc. We continue to feel that the only way out is for women themselves to read and understand the religious texts. We felt that the male authority figure in religion was exaggerated as all important and that must be changed. We continue to demand reform in Muslim personal law. Equally, we feel the need for social reform in the community where girls and women are provided equal opportunities. We were very comfortable with the consonance between constitutional and Quranic values of justice, fairness, kindness, compassion, equality. The BMMA was formed based on these values.

Zakia feels fortunate to have found women friends and co-travelers in BMMA including Noorjehan and all the state leaders who share a common vision of a gender just world. We have had many triumphs and tribulations together.

The BMMA has succeeded in giving the message of gender justice in Islam. Today, we need more and more women and men to come forward to take this message further into thinking and into practice.

Unfortunately, today our democracy is threatened by forces of religious division and hatred. We need to fight this challenge by building bridges across communities and locations.

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**NOORJEHAN
SAFIA NIAZ**



Personal Information

She is the co-founder of BMMA. She stays in Mumbai with her husband, 2 teenage sons and mother in law. She has an elder brother and sister who stay with their respective families.

She studied in the Diamond Jubilee High School [Agakhan Trust] in Mumbai and later graduated with Philosophy from Wilson College, Mumbai University. Thereafter she did her post-graduation in social work from Tata Institute of Social Sciences. After many years she did her Ph.D. from YCMOU in Sociology. She is also a diploma holder in Management from the prestigious Narsee Moonjee Institute of Management Studies, Mumbai. She has attended many leadership development programs, important ones being the Common Purpose and the Dasra Social Impact Programme. She is also an Ashoka and an Aspire Fellow.

Noorjehan is a published author and co-author of many books, especially focusing on Muslim women. Along with Zakia, she has undertaken many researches and studies to underline the status of Muslim women and Muslim family law. She is a fitness enthusiast training in zumba and yoga. She is a certified counselor and hypnotherapist and a student of Hindustani classical vocals.

Her father was a post graduate in History and worked in Bombay Port Trust as chief auditor. Her mother was a post graduate in Urdu and was a teacher in a government school. Her father stayed with his in laws, which comprised of Noorjehan's mother and mother's 5 sisters. Her mother belonged to the Cutchi Memon community and father from the southern/western part of India, a dakhni. Their marriage in those days was a

sacrilege, though both were Muslims. He also happened to be her teacher. Being brought up with a gentle and loving father and 6 loving women in the family, Noorjehan had an emotionally anchored childhood.

While Noorjehan's father gave her a stimulating intellectual environment with daily newspaper, magazines, tabloids and other books, her mother gave her a very strong emotional anchor, warmth, unconditional love and attention. She learnt to deal with them as adults because she was treated like an adult by them.

She got married at the age of 30 to a non-Muslim man. Her husband having worked with top national and international companies, is now a freelance corporate trainer, adventure traveler, hypnotherapist, You Tuber and a wonderful and supportive human being. As a movement activist, Noorjehan is indebted to her husband for playing that supportive role, without which it would have been difficult to do what she has done. She is highly influenced by his high zest for life, never having a dull moment with him. He is drunk on life, always so highly positive that nothing can faze him. She took to life as an adventure by the sheer fact of sharing it with him. In an inter religious marriage, to stand by her so that she could continue with her maiden name and her religious identity is no small feat. By extension, to find in laws who took that in their stride calls for strong personalities, fortitude and a rare ability to adapt to the new generation.

Influencers

Family is the first influencer. The emotional anchoring, the love and security and sense of belonging, all go into making us into a person we are. Not just her two parents

but maternal aunts, showered unconditional love and attention on her. Siblings, both elder to her, continue to play the role of parents. Sister in law is a sister, no less.

Many teachers in school influenced her. She learnt many things from them. The need of discipline and love for their students was something which influenced her. Most teachers were very thorough with their subjects and what they taught then, still remains etched in her memory. The way they taught has been a major contributor in her becoming an ardent admirer of academics, theoretical understanding of issues, importance of grammar and spellings and so many more, small and big aspects of learning and teaching.

She remembers reading Readers Digest, Illustrated Weekly, daily newspapers, even comic books like Chacha Choudhari, and so many more. Reading habits were deeply inculcated. Later in school she found herself picking up books from the library like the Hardy Boys, Dana Girls, Enid Blyton books, Nancy Drew etc. In teenage years it was a magazine called Savvy, which brought in a strong gender perspective. Stories of women achievers, stories of grit and determination all settled in her sub conscious mind, preparing her to work as a women's rights activist. In the college years a very strong influence was of her professor, Sudhakar Soloman Raj. Approach towards people, reading habits, love for nature, the ability to say, 'I don't know', understanding the importance of knowledge and wisdom – all came from being his student.

The list of books which have influenced her can be endless but a few notable ones are – Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Small is Beautiful, Outliers, Gender Jihad, Men in Charge? Books written by Fatima Mernissi, Dr. Amina Wadud, Mehru Jafar, Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, Dr. Zeenat

Shaukat Ali, books on management principles like the Seven Habits, I am OK You are OK, fiction like the Thousand Splendid Suns, Kite Runner, history chroniclers like India After Gandhi – were a huge influence. In college she was a student of philosophy and got an in-depth understanding of Indian philosophy to which she goes back to for a deeper understanding of life and creation. The two books that continue to amaze and inspire her and she reads them all the time is the Constitution of India and the Holy Quran.

Work Information

Since 1992 from the time she passed out of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, she has been working with Muslim women at the community level. The community connect has not broken since then. And since starting BMMA in 2007, her focus has been to work towards codifying the Muslim law, coordinating the activities of BMMA across the country and doing research and studies.

The riots of 1992–93 post Babri masjid demolition was the turning point and it also happened at a time when she had just finished her short stint in MAVIM [Mahila Arthic Mahamandal], a state government undertaking. MAVIM promised job security but no work satisfaction. She left the secure government job within 6 months and joined YUVA as Mumbai was gripped by the post Babri masjid demolition. YUVA [Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action] was an eye opener in many ways. The community-based work during and post the most horrific communal conflagration triggered the strong sense in her to work for the development of the community and specifically with Muslim women. 6th December 1992 was also the

day she became conscious of her Muslim identity. Never before in college or university did it matter, nor was it even a part of consciousness that she is a Muslim. To this day and even then, her closest friends have been Hindus and Christians and Parsis.

The consciousness of one's religious identity through a communal pogrom is the biggest damage done by communal violence. It takes away the basic humanity which binds us all. The othering on the basis of a certain identity creates gulfs and not bridges. The biggest damage has been the hate and othering which generations have imbibed, the impact of which we see today.

While dealing with the riots, while dealing with personal and family safety, while being displaced to a safer place and while doing riot relief and rehabilitation work, she asked herself, where did we go wrong as a community and where did we go wrong as a nation?

With a determination to work with Muslim women, after YUVA she worked with Anjuman-e-Islam for 5 years followed by a long stint of 9 years in WRAG [Women's Research and Action Group]. Since 2007 she is working with some of the most amazing, badass women in BMMA. In 2010 she founded the Ashana Trust so that she could raise resources to support the activities of BMMA.

Values and Beliefs

Belief in humanity is the first religion of all human beings. This religion is not just confined to humans but enables an innate connect with all living beings including the natural bounties. We are bound together as interconnected living entities, meant to live together

in harmony. Humans, animals, plants, rivers, mountains, soil, air, water, and all other elements are connected in a universal whole giving life and meaning to everyone and everything.

Quranic values of justice, equality, wisdom, compassion, ethical and moral framework of Islam, the spiritual concept of *tawheed* [oneness of all beings on earth], idea of human beings as agents of God, intending harmony and peace and shared existence, and God itself being the universal energy present in all living beings including nature – are her core values and beliefs. She also believes that while the Muslim world has focused on the juristic Islam, it has forgotten the ethical, cosmological, philosophical aspects which is extremely rich and deep. Many scholars whom she follows and reads have written and spoken tons on it, but as a community which is stuck in a warp, does not show any inclination to understand how truly diverse Islamic history and theology is.

The values embedded in the Preamble of the Constitution continues to guide her in her personal and professional life. Equality, justice, freedom, fraternity, democracy, socialism, secularism are her guiding principles.

Achievements and Failures

Life has been a series of achievements and successes because of wonderful BMMA people around her. The biggest of course remains the triple divorce legislation which has impacted the life of close to 80 million Muslim women directly and has had an indirect effect on the

entire Muslim community. A legislation that provides a strong sense of negotiating power to the women who earlier was abandoned legally by just those three words. The sheer impact of that law, not just on the current generation but on all generations to come, is huge.

Other achievement is the Haji Ali judgement which reversed a regressive move halting women's entry into the sanctum sanctorum. It was a victory which got endorsed by the Supreme Court and paved way for women from other communities to demand the end of discrimination at religious places.

The *Darul Uloom Niswaan* paved the way for Muslim women to become qazis. Nationally 15 and in Mumbai 5 women have become qazis through a formal certified course.

Aurton ki Shariat Adalats [Women's Shariah Courts], *Karwaan* centres [for livelihood training] are other milestones of BMMA. Noorjehan is happy that the providence gave her the opportunity to work with some amazing women to do the above the work.

Failures are never failures but opportunities in disguise. Only issue that holds her back in her work is lack of resources. Inability to raise funds for BMMA is a definite setback but it is also an opportunity to take stock and find other means of survival. Resources or lack of it, BMMA and its leadership continues to fight at all levels for all its citizenship rights.

Family Support

In the maternal family as a young activist she had full support of her parents. They stood by her and other

than worrying about her food and safety, never raised any objections to her late hours of work or difficult working conditions. Her mother would always cajole her to work in a bank, which has fixed hours of work and 'safe'. But later she gave up knowing fully well that it's not working with her daughter. Because she enjoyed her parent's confidence and support, she was able to soar new heights, reach new horizons and continued to move ahead knowing fully well that they stand by her, come what may. This confidence, which children have on parents, actually comes from the confidence and conviction that parents have on their children. Parents who are sure about their upbringing also know that their child cannot go wrong.

Even later in life, there was no negotiation required with the family. Maternal and marital families just stood like rock with her, letting her grow in the assurance that they are there with her, to back her, to help and support her and to give her love and solidarity if she falls back. Especially her mother in law who took great pride in her work and was always eager to watch the news channel whenever her interviews were aired.

Add to this list of supporters have been her children. As small children they adjusted to her work schedules and travelling. As they grew up, they have been helping her do a lot of her work. Her younger son is a tech savvy person. So, all her complaints with the phone, internet, laptop, printing, photocopying, downloading – are addressed efficiently by him. Elder one is a photographer and a videographer, shooting some of her sessions, shooting documentary film on the work done, managing her photo files and CDs, even taking sessions in the community with children and teenagers.

The first news, good or bad is shared with her husband in the house and with Zubeda Khatoon Sheikh in the office. Somewhere in the book is also Zubeda Khatoon Shaikh's story. With Zubeda Khatoon, the journey goes back to 25 years. She was the one who enabled Noorjehan's community rootedness. And inspite of the ups and downs and through joint journeys in various organization, they continue to work actively to this day in BMMA.

From amongst her family, she counts the most on is her husband. She knows he will never leave her side. He is a friend and a guide and go-to guy for her.

Income and Spending Decisions

Right now, she does not actively contribute to the family finances. Her personal expenses are managed through her hypnotherapy and counseling work. This work in BMMA would not have been possible if she had taken up a 'job' in the social sector. Even when there were funds in the organization, she never earned enough to support the family in a big way. Through her registered organization, Ashana Trust, she barely got some money, if at all it was budgeted in the project. But whatever she earned it was for her to decide and spend. Nobody asked.

For people in movements, it is important to have one partner who foots the bills so that the other can focus on the work without having to worry about money. For Noorjehan, her pillar of support has been her husband who never once asked why she is not ever in a position to bring in the money. Only such unconditional financial support can leave the activist with enough space and energy to work on the issue 100%.

Noorjehan has both maternal and marital property in her name. She very strongly believes that every woman must be financially independent or atleast must have the capacity to be financially independent. Women who are home makers must ensure that they have money which they call their own which they can bank upon in need and which is rightfully theirs.

Relationship with Other Communities

As said earlier, her best friends till date are non-Muslims. She has married a non-Muslim man; she is surrounded by people of another faith but the human connect is the first that gets established and remains as the guiding force in those relationships.

The state today has never hidden its anti-Muslim sentiments knowing fully well that many will support its worldview. It is also not a hidden fact that the current political dispensation belongs to the 90-year-old organization, which came into being precisely to oppose the 'foreign' influences, namely, Islam and Christianity. The ideology stands on a negative premise of opposing something instead of proposing. It proposes the idea of a Hindu nation, yes, but that proposition itself is based on those aspects of Hinduism with which no true Hindu identifies. Hinduism is not about hating the other, killing the other, treating women as second-class citizen or espousing a hate filled nation.

What we see today is the ongoing efforts to establish a Hindu nation. The proponents never really learned from the Pakistan/Bangladesh experience that religion can never be the basis of nationhood. The religious identities

also keep narrowing down; who is a co-religionist and who is not, is so fluid. And who will decide and define who is a real Hindu or Muslim? Whose definition do we follow? Can there be one consolidated, universal identity?

Unfortunately, as a nation we have reached a state of consolidated politics of hatred, exclusion, bigotry compounded with rampant immoral profiteering. As this study is underway, the Indian state has cleverly integrated the 3 arms of governance into one, leaving no scope of checks and balances. This sly and manipulative act of the elected representatives sounds a death knell for democracy.

That this communal animosity is a planned act can be understood from the fact that otherwise we can see all communities sharing good relationship with each other. Many inter-religious marriages are happy, children of such marriages are turning out to be balanced individuals, people of different faiths stay under the same roof and are creating a family and society. People of different faiths work together for a common goal in organizations and other work places. People have best friends in people of the other community. People have sacrificed for others irrespective of the others faith. Religions have amalgamated so much from other faiths. Rituals from different faiths have such uncanny similarities pointing to assimilation and shared learnings. So, while we see intense hate, we also observe the human connect, love and camaraderie. End of the day, it is each one's call – what do we want to pick up, the hate or the love?

The solution also lies in being open to each other about one's shortcomings as a community. Instead

of pointing fingers to the other community for one's own state of affairs, it is more important to see within, where the rest of the three fingers are pointing. Are we strong enough as a representative of our community to sit in front of the other and ask, 'tell me your views about me as a Muslim'? Are we strong enough to hear what will be said? Will we be good listeners? Will we respond or will we react? Honest and deep conversations about the myths and prejudices about each other is what is required to heal. Soured relationships will not heal unless we acknowledge the sickness. Point is – is anybody ready for this deep diving?

Politics

Resources and power are two important tools that one gets in politics by which social reform is made easier. As activists these are the two ingredients that movements lack. We always lack resources and we are always out of the ambit of political power. But in a democracy, there is no meaning to political power without the people. It is the people who must realize their own power in a democratic political set up.

There are many reasons for her not joining any political dispensation. To be able to enter politics, lots of resources are required. In party politics it is mandatory to follow the party lines on all issues, local and national. There is no possibility of any independent thought or activity line. Even to be able to get a ticket within the party to contest elections is not an easy task. Lot of money is exchanged just so that one is able to get a ticket within the party to stand for elections.

As an independent candidate it is even more difficult because all resources needed are to be raised by the person herself. One also needs to be careful as to who supports you with resources and what is the hidden agenda, if any.

For women and for Muslim women it is even more difficult. For women there is an additional worry of character assassination. Her personal life is dragged out for every one and anyone to dissect and comment. For Muslim women it is again an additional risk of barbs and accusations from her own community. Her dress, her hair, her family, her marriage and everything else possible is dragged into the open for all and sundry to comment and deride.

People who are into politics now show what kind of people find comfort in entering politics. It appears that all those who want to make quick money, those who want to continue to indulge or begin to indulge in criminal activities, find themselves very comfortable in a political system. There are very few who enter politics because they want to make a difference or contribute for the betterment of the society.

There is a need for feminization of political spaces. There is too much aggression, dishonesty, cut throat competition, hatred, and harmful behavior. And conversely there is no cooperation, solidarity, love and compassion. The attitude is not how to benefit others but how to benefit one's self. In a democracy, one cannot even blame others. The buck stops at each of us. The situation can only improve if each individual becomes democratic in spirit, in both private and public space. Each individual must understand that

democratic rights and responsibilities go hand in hand. Our work does not end but begins as soon as we cast our vote. How many times do we visit our MP, MLA or corporators office? How many times do we organize ourselves for demanding civic amenities, for high school fees, for job insecurities etc.? If not then we have no right to crib about the failure of our political system.

Leadership

Amongst many skills, the most important leadership skill in her case has been the ability to push the boundaries, to challenge the unknown, to challenge the entrench patriarchy and loads of irreverence for existing fossilized structures and processes.

Being with women, training them, learning from them, singing with them, dancing with them – she loves it. Their effervescence invigorates her, their lack of intellectual pretense keeps her rooted. She understood intellectual simplicity from her fellow women and learnt to keep it simple for herself and for others. Too much abstraction and theoretical jargon serves no one. She understood issues like triple divorce not just from an academic, theoretical, religious perspective but from a very human point of view, from an emotional point of view and from a lived reality point of view.

Inability to raise resources has been the biggest failure as a leader. Inspite of doing her best, resources are hard to come by. That also is demotivating because one has the vision, the pathway and people but no resources to bring that vision to reality.

Risk? Everything, right from starting BMMA, setting up Aurton ki Shariah Adalat, setting up Darul Uloom Niswaan with first batch of women qazis, consultations on draft law, filing PIL in Supreme Court against triple divorce, filing PIL in Haji Ali case – the entire journey was fraught with risk. But the ability of the entire team to be together and work from grassroots to national advocacy is what bore fruit.

As a leader she motivates her team, first by keeping up her own motivation. Meeting regularly, talking to each other regularly, drawing up and implementing common programmes – has kept them all together.

What will Noorjehan do if not this? She is not interested in any work other than what she is doing. So, in times when there are no resources, no funds for team, no funds for activities, she is doing research on Muslim women's leadership, which is what you are holding in your hands right now. Anything that gets her closer to getting the Muslim women's voice out in the open – invigorates her. New ideas motivate her. She gets her strength from her city and national team. Just talking to them is enough. All that BMMA has done is possible because of her partnership with Zakia. Just the thought that she is there is motivating enough. This relationship is her strength. Having long chats with her, discussing issues, strategies, vision with her keeps her going.

Lack of resources demotivates her. There is so much to do but without money very little can be achieved. BMMA needs a good secretariat, a good communications team, a good documentation team, but very little is possible without resources. That takes her down. But the fact that inspite of this the entire team is together is what motivates her.

Reading, reading, reading – she feels she needs to read more, understand more, share more. Reading is a habit which all must develop, especially women, and especially Muslim women for challenging patriarchy, for knowing their rights, to counter misogyny and to develop a strong world view.

She needs to hone her IT skills, learn to use modern, forever evolving social media, learn to use it for training, awareness, outreach, campaigning and advocacy.

She is different from other male leaders because she never loses sight of the women's perspective. She understands herself and other women emotionally. She understands what a woman goes through simply because she is a woman. Male leaders lack gender empathy, they are short of sensitivity and are too committed to the male worldview and male perspective.

She is different from those female leaders who are steeped in patriarchal views, who cannot accept another women's demand for justice and equality, who are Islamophobic and women-phobic and who cannot accept diversity in the feminist world.

Men

Men have been brought up to believe that they are the protectors and maintainers of women. This role instead of remaining a responsibility has turned into a privilege for them. Just because he has a certain responsibility, he thinks what he does is superior to what women does, which is nurturing and caring. The hierarchy and superiority of what he does is ingrained in him. Money making and providing for the family somehow becomes a superior task and anybody doing that is superior.

Men are unable to accept women also as a provider and maintainer. And conversely men are also not allowed by their patriarchal socialization to develop qualities of nurturing and caring. These qualities are also deemed as inferior and feminine and not worth developing. The hierarchy and division and superiority of human tasks and responsibilities are at the root of gender violence.

It has not been easy to work with men as men are not used to believing that some women know more than them. They cannot be receiving *gyan* [knowledge] from a woman as one of the male participants had said. Men are not man enough if they are at the receiving end of information or knowledge from a woman. Hence as part of our work we reached out to boys not older than 15 years.

Men must learn to understand that a woman is a human being first. Second, she has self-respect, she has an opinion, and she can think and feel and that she can know more than a man. His arrogance, his attitude of superiority, his perspective and mindset full of patriarchy must change.

Women

Conversely women think they are inferior to men. They believe they know less, they think less, they are emotional, they are not capable of taking decisions and are not supposed to express their thoughts and opinions. If women put themselves on the lesser scale, no power on earth can put her back up. She has to believe in her own self. She must first consider herself as a human being and believe that she is an equal.

This lack of self-love is the biggest resistance in organizing women. She needs to put herself first. What is it that SHE wants, what is HER view, what will make HER happy, what are HER priorities? Constantly thinking about others first, is a bad habit with women. Women also are not able to go beyond their families. Hence, they don't think of themselves and they don't think of the larger community. They are stuck in the endless cycle of serving the family, first the maternal and then the marital. That leaves them with no time, energy, inclination to be altruistic, if they are keen on it. So many promising women leaders want to contribute to the movement but are caught in the family web of endless and sometimes self-inflicted responsibilities.

When women, who have not even had the privilege to go to school, challenge authority, fight for rights, within family and outside – that for Noorjehan is the highpoint of working with women. It makes her wonder whether formal education, formal employment, good language skills etc. are such overrated attributes? You have none of it and yet you can be a champion, which so many women have already proved.

Inner Being

She believes that she was born to work with Muslim women. And she got this sense way back in 1992 when she worked in the riot torn Jogeshwari east and thereafter with Rahe Haq, a Muslim women's community-based organization in Mumbai. That being the focus, it also later became clear that within the larger boundary of Muslim women's issues, she needs to focus on Muslim family law reform. Muslim family

law must be codified so that a Muslim woman gets legal protection within families. So, while her larger purpose is empowering Muslim women, the specific purpose is to codify Muslim family law.

She wants to be remembered as one of many Muslim women who were instrumental in bringing about law reforms, one who made Muslim women believe in herself, who trained them with new information, who turned them into trainers and counselors and lawyers and qazis and change makers.

Spending time with women, singing with them, dancing with them, and training them – makes her happy. She smiles when women challenge their oppression and fight their own battles.

On a personal note, she is happy when she gets a note right while doing classical singing, when in her therapy sessions the client is relieved of her troubles, when she has long chat sessions with her husband and children, when her children share with her their deepest concerns, when they cook in the kitchen, when they are praised by neighbours to be good children, when they express their feminist perspective or even better, point out flaws in my own. There are too many blessing to count!!

Soulful lyrics and music tear her up. One song which invariably brings in the tears is *Ay mere pyare vatan, ay mere bichade chaman, tujh pe dil qurban* [it is a soulful patriotic song]

On hard days what makes you get up and go about your work? She tells herself – *Kuch to karna padega, jo ho sakta hai vo to karna hai*, [something needs to

be done, do whatever is possible]. Its ok, this will pass, cannot give up, *na?* have to keep trying, *chalo* take rest today, may be tomorrow but no brooding after that! She says all that to herself and takes things head on after the period of lull.

In times of crisis, her mantra is action. She asks herself, like a true-blue activist, *kya karna hai?* Do what needs to be done!

Her scariest moments were during the riots of 1992–93 when her house was at risk of being attacked. It was as if the entire family was facing death. While the family escaped unharmed, the next 6 months spent in another home were also depressing and worrying. The fear remained even after the family shifted back to the house. Many nights after that were restless and scary.

Noorjehan shares below many moments of pride which were possible only because of her friend, colleague, soul-mate, Zakia Soman. Together they have paved the way for generations of Muslim women to stake their rightful place in the sun.

She is most proud of the Haji Ali issue as it spanned from a personal discomfort to a judgment in the Supreme Court setting precedent for all times to come and which paved way for Muslim and other women to stake her claim in spiritual and religious spaces hitherto occupied by men. There were many moments, which pulled her down; the political leaders did not listen, the government bodies did not pay heed, not to mention the trustees who were downright insulting and the long struggle to locate a brave lawyer who would fight the case. But with strong women in the team, success was made possible.

Also, proud of the whole process of doing consultations with women across the country to draft a Muslim family law, to draft the triple divorce bill, and the entire process of campaigning and lobbying and building up public opinion for getting a law against triple divorce. It was exhilarating and satisfying. The fact that 80 million women were directly benefitted, says it all.

The entire process of setting up the syllabus of the qazi training, working on the module and carrying it out, sometimes with and most of the times, without resources, and finally enabling 20 women to become qazis was a hugely satisfying and a proud moment. Not that Muslim women have not been qazis before. But this time, it was through a thorough training process, exams, report cards.

At a personal level, she is proud of the fact that she took that important step of adding her mother's name to her name and subsequently, adding her name to her children's name.

About Islam

Values of equality, justice, wisdom, freedom and compassion have inspired Noorjehan. There are Quranic verses on goodness, on justice, on equality of creation, on being kind and compassionate. Those must be revived and propagated. Knowledge, enlightenment, balance, peace and tranquility are central to Islamic theology. It has no place for ignorance, hatred, injustice, cruelty and arrogance and inequality. The central theme of Islam is 'do good and resist evil'. Core to Islam is knowledge and wisdom. Knowing one's self, being

self-critical for self-improvement, knowing others to understand and accept others and to strive for harmony in God's all creation is the essence of Islam. The Islamic theosophy is not just knowing God but also knowing self and others to create a balanced and harmonious world.

The spread of ultra-conservatism, the Saudization of Islam with spread of ultra orthodox versions, the brutal repression of women and the impact of petro-dollars on the middle east and the rest of the world – are some of the challenges faced by Islam and the larger Muslim community. The homogenization project of Saudi Arab insisting on their version of Islam as the final version has killed the diversity within the Muslim world. While Islamophobia is real, hoisted by western imperialist powers for their own profits, it is also true that large sections of Muslims have also not challenged this Saudi brand of Islam.

The Muslim community must self-reflect and ask itself, why is the world scared of them, why does the world want to run away from them, why does the world want to keep a hawk eye on them, why are people nervous to have Muslims around? Probably the answer is because they are worried that they will do to them what they did to themselves. The large section of non-Muslim society sees increasing number of women wearing the hijab. They also see young school going girls made to wear scarf, they see increasing religiosity and conservatism. They worry that if Islam spreads, love and humanity will not spread but regression and patriarchy will. Women will be made to cover themselves from head to toe like they did in Afghanistan or like they are doing in certain sections within India as well. It is our

responsibility as a community to address these issues within as well as with the larger society.

It is not just the non-Muslims who worry, the Muslims too worry. Will they stop women working outside, will they ask for full or half or quarter hijab, will they demand 5 times namaz, will they stop women from going to *dargahs* or other sacred spaces, will they stop sacred activities like *fateha* and *niaz*. Will they have further divisions of cemeteries, will they kill/ troll those Muslims who do not agree to the Saudi version of Islam? These questions are real and must be addressed with full honesty, with a spirit of self-reflection and not dismissed as a rant.

The answer is the return to the values of Islam, the values of justice, equality, freedom, democracy, wisdom and compassion. The ethical, moral framework of Islam, the universal values of humanity and love for all must be revived and restored.

Noorjehan would like to see in Muslim societies, return of the sense of freedom, of women and of all religious and ethnic minorities. Ordinary Muslims supported by scholars and specifically women scholars must lead and openly discuss and propagate the core humanistic theology of Islam which will eventually reform the Muslim societies. Reason being that most omissions and commissions of the community has a direct reference to religion, that version of religion that has been fed by the most conservative. This strangle hold of the conservatives must be loosened by exposing the masses to the universal and humanistic values of Islam.

The Indian Muslims must also be aware of their own hypocrisy. Demand for secularism and protection of

rights of minorities cannot be demanded when we are a minority and demolished when we are in a majority. This is hypocrisy. Article 14 of the Indian constitution is not just meant for Muslim men. It applies to Muslim women as well and Muslim men must get that straight in their head. Demolition of Babri masjid was an act of crime but so was the demolition of Bamiyan Buddhas – we need to get this clarity as a community.

Relationship with India

She says, 'It is my soil, where I belong. Nobody can take that away from me'. India will not be India if it is not secular. The poison of otherness must be cleansed off the Indian body. India is not just a nation with boundaries; it is much more than that. It is a civilization and a way of life. It has taught the world the art of amalgamation, integration, and assimilation. The diversity of humans here is mind-boggling; there are so many different worlds staying together. This is the beauty. The idea of this diverse India is the strength. And time and again it has been challenged. Currently it is facing its biggest challenge. How we overcome will determine how strong our roots are. Will India allow itself to be guided by exclusion, hate and otherness or will it take this phase as an aberration and go back to its celebrated unity in diversity?

The responsibility lies with the saner members of the majority community to reject political Hinduism, or Hindutva. Just as political Islam has wrecked havoc with Muslims and Islam itself, and the responsibility of rejecting orthodoxy lies with the saner elements within the Muslim community, similarly the liberal Hindus

must come forward to stop the havoc being wrecked on Hinduism. The diversity within Hinduism is its beauty.

India also cannot allow itself to give up socialism, cannot give up being a welfare state. India cannot allow itself to be run by profit making corporations. It cannot ignore the plight of the scores of daily wage earners, the rural migrants in urban areas, the construction workers, the informal sector workers, the sex workers, the street food vendors, the hawkers, the farmers, the agricultural labourers, and so many more categories. Public food distribution system, public health systems and public education system must be revived fully and made fully efficient and functional.

Future

She wants the Muslim family law to be fully codified. She wants legislations against polygamy, halala, muta and underage marriages. She wants equal inheritance rights; and she wants adoption to become legal.

She wants to see Islamic renaissance and Islamic theological reforms. She wants equality, justice, compassion and freedom to become central Muslim values, practiced and played out by Muslims every single day. Political Islam must end. No country should have any religion as a state religion.

She also wants Muslim women's leadership to further emerge and lead the community and country towards growth and development. To that end her efforts need to grow and hence the added need for more resources.

She wants to take up urban farming in a big way and if possible, own a small farm so that her future

generations are food-sustained. The COVID pandemic has taught her that food sustainability is all that matters. In a reverse, as urbanites, we need to start to go back to our roots, as farmers, as sustainers of the soil and as someone who lives in harmony with all creation.

Advice

Learn to speak truth to power. Be scared only if you have harmed anyone or have illegally benefitted yourself. And that too be scared to face yourself in the mirror, before you are scared of God or anybody other human being.

Be conscious of the wasteful lifestyle which the youth has got so used to today. Always ask, is my life in harmony with all living beings, including but not confined to human beings?

Always think from the perspective of the poor and the marginalized.

Since it is not easy, strive to be truthful to the values of equality, justice, freedom, democracy, humanness, and kindness.

Personal goals

She has found resonance in Hindustani classical vocals which she is learning since last three years. She enjoys the rigors involved in learning this music, history of which goes back to thousands of years. It's an art as well as science, it is fun as well as hard work, it is easy but also very deep and profound, it's the language of the universe and it's a universal language.

She was always interested in dance and anything to do with music. Zumba gave her the perfect opportunity to combine fitness and dance. Dance in any form offers stress release in a fun way. It builds camaraderie while building health and stamina. It is one lifetime hobby and fitness model that she is going to follow.

Reading and writing take up time when she is not in the field. Reading on various topics; favourite being feminism, women, Islam, management, philosophy, spirituality, religion. She wants to write articles, books on Muslim women's lives, on Islam, on mental health and many more.

Mental health counseling is her new passion. She is a certified hypnotherapist and a counselor helping to heal. She is looking upto this work as a source of sustenance as well. Lockdown resulted in her You Tube Channel. She intends to upload videos on topics relevant to her work.

She believes, life is what we make of it, so make of it what you want and be happy.



ISSUES



PERCEPTIONS ABOUT GENDER



About Women

Jeibunnisa begins and actually sums up also. Women are really poor. Half of their day just passes away in search of livelihood or fending for the family. The other half goes away in looking after the family and their needs. It is very essential to work for the employment opportunities for women. On the other hand, women who are educated and well placed do not even come out of their homes. They are more traditional and conservative. As Muslim women leaders, it is important that we need to reach out to this section through the social media.

Jeibunnisa and Nishat have worked extensively with other women's organization and they have observed that as long as you are a minority women, it is fine. As a Muslim woman, you will never be taken in the overall leadership position. The stated reason is that by taking in Muslim women in a leadership position would bring in the vision of a minority. So how much ever Muslim women work hard they are never included in the top leadership. While Nishat has a strong sense

of solidarity with all women across caste, religion and class, she also believes that Muslim women's issues have not been considered issues at all. The kind of work that should have happened in their localities never happened. All kinds of reasons are given; sometimes it is fear; sometimes it is unhygienic conditions. All slum communities have the same kind of conditions irrespective of their religion. So why are Muslim communities neglected? There is no passion when it comes to working in Muslim ghettos. And in the name of Muslims, many organizations get big projects but these organizations are not rooted in the communities. When work needs to get done in the communities, then they think of Nishat Hussain, as Nishat says and is true for all BMMA leaders' experiences with civil society groups.

Niyazmeen has interacted more with women leaders in the communities with the purpose of enabling their leadership. And she finds that these community leaders have certain qualities, which she needs to develop for herself. For instance, Meer Jahan is one community leader with whom Niyazmeen works. Niyazmeen describes her as a very responsible woman who understands very well that we as a community need to change. She motivates women to attend the meetings and training programmes. While Niyazmeen would request women to come for meetings, Meer Jahan is more assertive and invites women for meetings as if it is her right to call them. And she feels she needs to develop these qualities that Meer Jahan has. She conveys to women that it is even their responsibility to come out and participate and not just hers to call them. Sometimes even the victims take activists for

granted. Victims think that these activists are paid for this work and so they must work FOR them. But Meer Jahan does not think like that. She tells them that she is not paid, but she wants the community to progress. While Niyazmeen trains women on her rights, Meer Jahan helps them understand those rights in their daily context. Niyazmeen thinks it is our responsibility to enable leaders like Meer Jahan. It is not an easy task but is required.

Niyazmeen also differentiates between herself and a woman political leader. While a political leader will always talk about her party and votes, a social worker like her only wants progress for the society without worrying about what she gets in return. Women political leaders also come across as selfish and working for their own benefit. People understand that and do not respect such leaders. On the other hand leaders like Meer Jahan work honestly and selflessly for the community and get the blessings of the people and also their support. Even religious leaders do not want to reform the world; they are only worried about themselves. Activists are the ones who educate the community on their current perspectives and create alternative ones which are better and which will lead to change.

BMMA leaders can communicate with men on women's issues, as they themselves are empowered women. They can also do better advocacy with state on behalf of vulnerable women as they themselves have gone through those experiences. Either ways they are empowered and capable. Farhat thinks sharing small anecdotes with women go a long way in giving them strategies to deal with patriarchal men. She shares, once a maulana told one of the women to ask her [Farhat]

why there are no woman prophets if man and woman are equal. To this, Farhat asked about the hadis related to mothers. The hadis is about heavens being at the feet of a mother. All prophets are male and all mothers are female. So the heavens of the prophets are also at the feet of their mothers. So whose status is higher? The prophet or his mother? A woman can become a good leader if she uses strategy, if she uses her head and not her heart. A woman must develop her skills to beat patriarchy; she should know what she is talking. What ever she says, she must do her homework to answer the questions that may be thrown at her.

What differentiates Rahima from other women leaders is the fact that she has and continues to work directly in the community; she has always been a community organizer. There are women leaders who don't do community work directly. She is different from others because she is from the community, grown with the community and wants to continue work in the community, with the people. And that is her strength.

Women who do not have a gender perspective do not agree with Khatoon's work. They are not able to see issues from a feminist perspective and are not sensitive to what a woman goes through. They oppose her and in many instances stand on the side of the oppressive man. That needs to be corrected. To such women, she gives encouragement to come for trainings and meetings and understand how deviously patriarchy works against them. As an activist, Khatoon has seen the world and has seen the difficulties of women from close quarters. She herself has gone through so much that empathy just emerges easily. She believes her leadership is also different from those women leaders who are not able to

balance the various aspects of their lives. She also refers to those feminists who reject religion and appeal to women as if faith does not matter to them. For her it is important to take both religion and civil laws together. It is important to strike a balance. Also, it is important to take people along, show maturity, patience and perseverance, working without an ego, dialoging and establishing contacts with diverse kinds of people.

Safia adds, women are sensitive, women care for others, they nurture, they are kind and always thinks of benefitting and serving others. This feminization of the larger patriarchal world needs to be happening for the world to heal. As we see in our society, women are confined to the four walls of their house. The four walls are her world, she looks after the house, bears and rears children, cook, look after the needs of her husband. Whereas the truth is that women and men are created equal by God, what would this world be without women? But she is confined to her home. When God created women, it was not just to confine her to her home. God meant other things for her. And if one looks at the Prophet's life, his wife also always supported him; he would take advice from his daughter as well. Ayesha was well educated and was very knowledgeable. This shows that women must come out of the confines of her home and contribute to public life. She can and must have her own identity.

The biggest change that must happen in women is that she must evaluate for herself what is good for her. She must be confident, updated on knowledge, independent in decision-making and rational in her approach. That kind of transformation needs to happen. Jeibunnisa shares that women sometimes

don't understand the importance of knowing their rights. Sometimes when they are called for meetings, they will show that they are busy and not participate. Women are also deeply impacted by patriarchy and they themselves strongly believe that women must not go out, not educate herself etc. They have borne the brunt of patriarchy and it is important that these attitudes are addressed and changed. She is made to feel dependent, inferior and disempowered, according to Nasreen. Women are not the enemy of women; she is a victim of patriarchy and once feminist principles are engrained; she learns to show solidarity to other women.

And change has happened. Lot of women have learnt to speak their mind after attending so many meetings. Even Muslim women are coming forward. Especially during NRC protest, they came out in large numbers. It is an example of women's empowerment. NRC or National Register of Citizens is a process which the government of India had initiated to register all legal citizens of the country. This process was opposed by practically the entire country as it actually would have led to disenfranchising millions of citizens. Muslim women were in the forefront of opposing the NRC and BMMA leaders too initiated and participated in the protests.

BMMA leaders share their high points of working with fellow women and Nasreen says she is completely inspired by their life experiences, their capacity to take risks, their open mindedness, kindness, hard work and knowledge. One of the highpoints of Khatoon's work was the rally against fatwa. The rally of women was more than 10 km and they raised slogans against the maulanas. *Sarkar hamari chup hai, maulana se darti*

hai!!! Of course other high points have been the Haji Ali dargah judgment and the triple divorce judgment and legislation.

Mariya looks at women as sisters, as allies. Those from whom she faces resistance, she looks at them as victims of patriarchy and tries to have a dialogue and engage with them. She has faced resistance in the form of indifference in circles dominated by upper caste women. A lot of them do not seem to come to terms with the fact that a Muslim woman can lead. She is not saying all of them, but has encountered plenty. All women are unique. There is always scope for improvement, for herself and for all.

About Men

BMMA leaders exhort men to increase their knowledge and understanding about Islam and women's rights. Men want women to sit at home but Islam's vision for a woman is completely different than what they think. There is a gap there which men must try to understand and address. Just as they have concerns for their daughter, they must also be concerned about their wife. Part of the reason for men's narrow attitude is their lack of education. Jeibunnisa observes, that in her team, women volunteers are more educated than their husbands. She agrees, though, that even educated men, men who have good economic background stop thinking once they start going to the *jamaat* [conservative men's group which act like community arbitrators]. Their thinking changes completely. Also, educated or not, men assume that he is more knowledgeable than women simply because he is a man.

Muslim men if made to understand issues, learn and change. Naseem and other BMMA leaders share that after the passage of the triple divorce law, many men are now coming forward for counseling and are not resorting to instant divorce. They realize that the law is stringent and they must not terminate marriage immediately.

In her work she always believed that man should be involved, adds Jeibunnisa. She always invites men, jamaat people for her meetings. She believes that by doing so she is giving them an opportunity to increase their knowledge and understanding. On gender issues too she talks to them. She discusses with them about the rights of women in the Quran, legal provisions for women. Through such interactions she hopes to influence them. She shares with them the IEC material on domestic violence, rights of women in Quran etc. She encourages women to go home and discuss these issues, share it with their children, especially girl children. She works with both boys and girls so that the future generation grows with a better sense of understanding and knowledge of women's rights.

Experience shows that most of the men-led organizations are less efficient. There are also men-led organizations who have refused to work with BMMA leaders, saying that she is part of that organization which has worked on the issue of triple talak. Male leaders are patriarchal. They never understand women. They only expect the women to fit into the traditional roles of serving the husband and his family. Men may never really understand women and her vulnerabilities.

Safia and Khatoon believe that women's organization listen to the men as well unlike the men's organization,

especially the religious ones, who give no audience to women. Her story does not matter to them, but the stories of men matter to women's organization. Women's spaces are just spaces even for men who do injustice. It is also a space for the women to be counseled if she happens to be in the wrong. It is a safe space for her as she is the one more vulnerable. In fact it is sometimes the only space where she is heard. Her parents, in laws, husband, and children – all ignore her voice.

Khatoon says, male leaders are patriarchal. They never understand women and her vulnerabilities. They only expect the women to fit into the traditional roles of serving the husband and his family. She then asks God, 'why have you not given the reins of the world in the hands of women?' Today a woman faces violence from men and is dependent on him. Why have men got so much status? It is said, after God it is the man who must be worshiped. Why do men show their so-called godliness on women? Children and grandchildren need to be told that they are not superior or inferior, just equal. Both are created equal by God. The boys also get influenced by what they hear in the masjid and in the madrasa, which influences how they behave with women. They are told that women are like the slippers worn in the leg and men are like the *pagdi* [head gear]. These influences need to be challenged. Young men and women must be made to understand that they need to love and respect each other and treat each other equally.

A man must first learn to respect woman. Farhat always tells men, to have a beard is *sunnat* [Prophet's tradition], but to marry a woman elder to you is also *sunnat*, to support your wife in household chores is also *sunnat*. These pro women *sunnat* are cleanly edited by

the patriarchal mindset. She says her job is to highlight those aspects of Islam and teach this to women, who then can use it as a strategy to fight patriarchy. *Unka nas pakdo aur mudde ka baat bolo.* [understand their psyche and talk to the point]

Men also misuse women's leadership but don't give them their due or the respect their leadership. During the NRC opposition, men called women for the planning meeting but insisted that they sit separately. Most women put up with this behavior very easily which they should not. Men know that nothing much will happen without women but they also don't want to share credit with them. They cede the space for women and when she starts to lead, they take away that space, they take away the credit for themselves for what women has done. Women must object and claim their rightful place and deserved respect.

Noorjahan Diwan shares that a lot of men support her in her work. But it is also true that if a woman comes forward, her family and her community is also the first to stop and discourage her. When she was working on triple divorce issue, her husband went against her. He said she is working against Islam and she will be expelled from it. But when she convinced him, showed him all the books and training material, then he was convinced. A lot of women faced this opposition from their own families. She remembers a Delhi high court judgement favouring under marriage of Muslim girls. She had protested against this judgment. She got together teenage girls who wore red *chunri* [a red stole on the head signifies marriage] on their heads with a placard saying, 'should I study or should I marry'? It got covered by the media in a big way. The conservative elements of

the community stood against her. They said, this was a good judgment in favour of the community. Why are you opposing it? Even for triple divorce law, she was shunned by the larger community. Muslim organisations boycotted her and even civil society groups boycotted her. They felt that people are angry with her and if they call her then people will be angry with them as well. This mindset needs to change.

Men wrongly think that women have been given a lot of rights by the state. They point out towards pro-women legislations and policies. Compared to the past, women are educating themselves and are also earning, so where is the need for more women's empowerment, they ask. What these men don't realize that these very statements reek of patriarchy. Even if it is true that women are already empowered, should they not be happy? But the fact that they are not indicates that much needs to be done.

BMMA leaders find themselves better than most of male leaders. Most men are in leadership positions simply because they have an opportunity to do so, and are having an enabling environment. Women are burdened with so many responsibilities, of the home of the children and yet have taken lead in so many spheres. And these household chores must be shared. Men must come forward to share the household burdens and not saddle it on women and hinder her growth as a person.

It is important to treat men as important stakeholders in the quest for women's empowerment. It is also important to clear the misunderstanding amongst men that women are against them. It is important to talk to men about the negative impact of their patriarchal

attitude. He must know that when he does not allow women to leave the house, when she is barred from education, when she is brutalized – she suffers, family suffers and the entire society suffers. All this and more are shared with men so that they become important allies and partners. It is important to take men along because if he is convinced, then his wife, daughter, daughter in law – all can participate with ease. Though not easy it is our responsibility to address the mindset of men. Their ego and their sense of hierarchy must be challenged.

Mariya has not looked at leadership from a gendered lens yet. She finds herself different from patriarchal leaders, which include both men and women.

She wants to look at men as allies but unfortunately, men specially Indian Muslim men in her experience find it very difficult to follow the lead of women of their communities. She wants to look at men as friends, as enablers who will take the struggle for gender equality forward. In addition, the biggest challenge that one faces as an Indian Muslim woman talking about reforms within the realm of religion is from the male clergy and from men who claim to represent all of Muslim society.

Men are also victims of the patriarchal system that is one of the root causes of most of the struggles that women face. Being brought up in a patriarchal set up they are made to believe that they are better than and superior to their female counterparts and that somehow they are more entitled. This entitlement needs to change.

POLITICS AND MUSLIM WOMEN



BMMA being a non-party political organization, it is very natural that BMMA leaders have a strong voice on the political ecosystem. All BMMA leaders interviewed had a strong opinion on the political system but also there were strong reasons why they were not a part of it. With all of them having activist backgrounds it was natural that political advocacy with peoples demands would be the tool for social reforms.

BMMA has worked closely with elected political leaders pushing them to fulfill their responsibilities towards the electorate. They have invited political leaders on their platforms so that they could facilitate women to place their demands before them and seek answers. Taking delegations, preparing list of demands, organizing public hearings, putting out peoples manifesto and submitting it to all contesting political parties, striving to put women's agenda into the manifesto of parties, doing peaceful protests, using social media to highlight and make direct demands from political representatives. Nasreen, sums up by saying that

that it is not just our responsibility but also our right to make demands from elected representatives.

Many of BMMA state leaders chronicled here did seriously consider entering the political system. Jeibunnisa in fact has attended a lot of training programmes organized by the communist party. She felt that there is strong need for joining a political party but she never got an opportunity. If she gets an opportunity she would join because she feels people friendly political forums do not exist. She would be willing to join a people friendly political party so that she can work better to promote community leadership. By joining politics, she would atleast try to dilute the process of communalism and the poison of hatred. She would also advocate for people's issues and strive to influence policies and dare say, 'change the world'.

Safia says, in Bhopal, her city, there is no scope of any political party except BJP and Congress. The hold of these two parties is very strong. Even as an independent it would be almost impossible to contest, let alone win. Moreover, as an independent there is no way to arrange the large amount of funds that would be required for the process. But she has the support of people, especially after her excellent work during the COVID pandemic. In fact, it is the people whom she has reached out to have suggested that she participate in the upcoming local elections. And she is confident that if resources can be arranged and if she wins then she can work better than all other political parties. Many years back she stood for corporation elections through CITU [Centre for Indian Trade Unions], CPI [M] [Communist Party of India, Marxist]. But now if she gets an opportunity she would contest as an independent. She has lost confidence in

the political parties who fight election only for selfish reasons and most have a bad name anyway.

Khatoon too would love to participate in politics but as an independent. The reason for not entering politics so far was the huge requirement of resources. Peoples support is required which she thinks she has but where are the resources? She also sees a disadvantage that in politics she may not be able to do the work as effectively as she is doing now. The work outside the political arena is unencumbered. She feels she is freer outside the political arena.

Niyazmeen also did think about entering the political foray but she is worried about the fact that there is so much lie, corruption and treachery in that field. Although she knows there is so much that can get done through political involvement but the field is completely corrupted. When sometimes work does not get done and sometimes when political leaders are required for their approval and signatures and when they don't help, then she strongly feels that people like us must enter politics and get rid of the corrupt and useless. If given opportunity then she might join but with the condition that she will not give up her work of working in communities, with women, because this work gives her immense satisfaction.

Rahima realizes that there is a lot of power and resources in a political system and that she will be able to do so much more and take policy decision if she enters politics. But eventually after giving a lot of thought decided not to enter that arena. Reason being, that when a person starts to associate with a party then the sole concern is whether the person they are helping is from

her party or not. So that becomes a criterion for helping people and that she is not comfortable with.

Reasons for not Joining

Nasreen, Farhat and Nishat are very sure that they don't want to enter the political arena at all. And there are many reasons for that, some local and some general. For instance, when Nishat started her organization many people approached her because she came across as a very fearless woman. There is no political party, which did not come to her asking her to join politics. They betted with each other saying that they will convince her to join their particular political party. But she understood one thing that if someone comes up in the community to work for people, the same political parties will never allow them to work, nor will they work themselves. She apologized to all of them, saying, that she gets great comfort, peace and satisfaction by being with the poor, which is her strength. Joining a party means joining and adhering to the ideologies of the party which she was never comfortable. She acknowledges that being in politics has its advantages but she also knows if she does not toe the political line, she will be thrown out immediately. She says she has been such a maverick, anyway, that nobody will keep her.

A lot of women who have emerged as a result of BMMA's leadership programme are planning to contest for the upcoming local and assembly elections. Women must stand for reserved seats. But the issue remains; that good people are not really allowed to come in. Political scene is infested with criminals, rapists, and kidnappers. The system is also very corrupt and is filled with illegal

and unscrupulous money dealing. Additionally, it is important that someone stays outside the system and pulls them up.

Farhat too was never interested in politics although her father was in the Indian National Congress and brother in law is Biju Janta Dal. Because she has a political background there was an assumption of her furthering her political agenda through her work. But she has seen politics from close quarters and knows she is not meant for it. She has heard elite Muslims make statements that take them away from the larger community. She cannot treat her own community with such disdain.

She feels that if work needs to be done, then it should be done in a way that is easy and with peace of mind. Political participation will give power but to get this power so many compromises will need to be done, and that is something she doesn't feel comfortable about. She says, 'I cannot sell my conscience'.

The reason Rahima opted out of party politics because she was worried about whether she will win or lose and whether she will be able to manage the responsibility that comes when one enters a political system. There are indeed women who have leadership qualities and are independent political leaders. But largely women who have entered politics through reservation are actually dominated by the male members of the family. They are also very capable but the male members who take all decisions squash their capabilities and leadership qualities. They may work independently outside the house but at the end of the day they have to come back to the house where she will have to

follow his instructions. That environment within the house should change. She cannot be independent and empowered outside the house and meek and cowering in the house. The influence of patriarchy is too extensive for real empowerment to happen in all spheres. If social empowerment happens then political empowerment will also happen automatically.

Mariya too is not part of any political movement or party. She believes that every political movement or party would demand absolute allegiance to its leadership and tolerate zero dissent, as has been evident throughout history and in the recent past and at present. For her, more than political ambitions or power, what holds importance are her values and principles. She calls a spade a spade, even though many a times it has led to a negative impact on her career and souring of networks that otherwise would have proved very beneficial for her. Politics would be no exception. She knows she would not be able to last there for too long. If one wants to make real impact, being part of the system is imperative. Where she is in her life right now, she does not think she is ready to enter party politics. She wants to be a civil society representative and make whatever impact she can in that capacity.

Khatoon strongly feels that as BMMA we have done the right thing by not associating ourselves with any political party. Individually too she is not active in any political party because they simply use people for their own vested interest. The people, who participate in political processes and get positions of power, simply forget the people who got them to power. They don't even talk to them with respect. With time she has become disillusioned with the political parties. She feels that even without any political patronage they

are working well, they are getting results; they are able to serve people, why should they become pawns in the hands of political groups? They stay outside the party system and yet raise relevant issues of the people, about their daily needs, about employment, about health issues-and that's good enough.

Nasreen and Naseem both strongly assert that the present political ecosystem is not at all conducive for any diligent person to participate. A lot of money is required to be able to even stand within that system. There is no value given to the background and the body of work of the person involved. So instead of focusing energies on a system that may not even respond to your presence, it is better to focus on the community to educate them to elect the right person or chose a correct party. Political education of the community then becomes more important and simultaneously the political system must also change for the better.

Women and Politics

Conditions for women and even more so for Muslim women, have not been so conducive that she could contribute to the political system of the country. It is a male dominated society, where men take important and unimportant decisions for her. Even if systems have been made conducive by introducing reserved wards for women by rotation, here too men manipulate the women contestants who are invariably his wife, mother or sister or any other family member. Men have subverted the system for themselves in a way that even if a woman gets an opportunity, she still has no freedom to do what she is capable of.

Men and women think differently. Women always think of how she can do the best for the society; to establish what is necessary for the society, do good for people. Men are more selfish. Safia shares her experience during the COVID pandemic. The local corporator of her area had two phone numbers and both the numbers were switched off. She wanted to call him up and ask what was he doing for the people of his constituency but he was unreachable. At the time of elections, he had come to ask for votes but now he is doing nothing. Nobody from the corporation has come to sanitize the area. So, what did we vote him for? Farhat sums up about leaders mentioned above, '*har shaakh me ullu baithe hai*, how do you expect *a gulistan*? [there is one idiot on every branch, how do you expect the garden to flourish?] Change will happen only if good people, good Muslims come forward to participate, however difficult it is. And women have instincts for kindness and nurturing. She can change the system if she gets full opportunity. Farhat believes that although she is not cut out for politics she would support and groom anyone who is willing to take the plunge. The system may not change soon and many compromises will have to be made, but if someone young and committed can do minimum compromises and reach the Parliament with women's demands, she would do her best to support and offer solidarity.

Further challenge for Muslim women is that if she stands for election, then the other political parties start communal politics by introducing Muslims from their own party to divide the votes. Noorjahan Diwan had a close experience of being inside a political party. She had joined the Indian National Congress. She was made the

president of the congress minority cell in Gujrat. She made a lot of women join Congress. But when it came to it, she was not able to fight the elections, rather she was not given the ticket to fight the election. The Congress first assured that they would give her the ticket. Her name was also declared for corporators elections. She was felicitated and people were also happy that a people's person is finally coming into the political fold. She helped her friend get the district leaders post. So, when the final decision was taken the party gave the ticket to her friend and not to her. This left her disillusioned. She left the party. She learnt her lesson that in a big political party, how much ever you work, but if you don't have contacts with its top leadership, then you don't stand a chance. And the top leaders don't see the work or the commitment of the leader but rely on their personal contacts and rapport. When she was betrayed, she filled the nomination form through another political party, NCP [Nationalist Congress Party]. But her friends insisted that the Muslim vote will get divided and the BJP [Bhartiya Janta Party], a right-wing Hindu party will win. So for the sake of keeping the secular vote intact, she withdrew from the process. This is the state of big national parties. And it is not easy to fight as an independent. It requires a lot of resources and, even if you win, in the decision-making forums, an independent candidate is not heard. Without the force of a party behind your back, an independent is not able to make a dent in the system.

But inspite of these challenges, women must be encouraged atleast to join the local governance structures, if not through an existing political party, then atleast as an independent.

It is a little scary because political parties have a lot of power and money and they can do anything to harm if they find a candidate threatening to their existence. They may not even like the fact that they are the same women who brought in triple divorce legislation. Even the work done by the organization can be pitted against her if she decides to contest elections. When the work done by women becomes too uncomfortable for them politically, they don't even call them for meetings and socio-political gatherings. Not that it matters, but it does show that active women who challenge patriarchy and stuck social mores are not welcome and appreciated.

For true political participation of women, she must truly be independent of any man and take her own decisions. The current environment is not conducive, it is only for namesake that women are encouraged to enter politics but truly the entire system needs to change for women to really make a difference in the society through politics. It truly feels like a *daldal*, [cesspool] right now.

What must be Done

For political empowerment of women, it is important that reservation is extended in the Assembly and Parliament. Also, the policy of reservation must be within all political parties. Space must be made for women to enter whichever party she wants to. Political parties are also male dominated. If the national and regional parties are genuinely concerned about gender equality especially within the political system, they must create space within their parties for women to enter.

There is a need to give space in national and regional parties for women representation from all communities.

If we want the Muslim community to give space for Muslim women, the community will need to change its mindset to let gender equality prevail within the community, to sensitize party leaders and self towards gender justice.

The entire election system needs to change, which right now is fraught with caste and communal politics and not democratic liberal politics. There is no true representation of the poor and its interests. Neither them nor their voice gets any hearing or representation. The entire political system has failed the people. That overall paradigmatic change in the political ecosystem is the need of the hour. Till such time the poor and the marginalized, especially women, have little chance for political resolution of their issues.

Nishat has many women friends who are in political leadership. To them she advises, 'don't follow the herd mentality. Be your own person, always do justice, use your own mind and be fair'.

FAITH STRENGTH AND CHALLENGES



All BMMA leaders have been inspired by the values and principles of Islam, which have guided them in their work with the larger community and the society. Justice, equality, wisdom, compassion, kindness continues to inspire and propel them. They are the backbone or the foundation stones on which the edifice of Islam has been built up. Many legal systems have taken inspiration from the equality principle of Islam; equality of gender and equality of all human beings. As Nasreen puts it, love, humanity and kindness makes up the whole of Islam.

Like Nishat, even Jeibunnisa is very concerned about the lose ways in which words like *jihad* and *kafir* are used by the community. [Jihad literally means to struggle and kafir literally means one who hides the truth]. Some Muslims use these terms against the people of other faith. They believe that non-Muslims are people against whom Muslims must fight because they are the ones who hide the truth or who don't believe in Islam]. By using these terms, we are communicating to the other community that we don't respect their faith. It brings in

the distance and a bitter taste in the relationship. For e.g. Jeibunnisa shares that there are some families who don't let non-Muslims to come in for *fateha* [special prayers]. This takes us away from other communities. In fact, such occasions should be an opportunity to call people of other faith in to our homes and share the festivities.

Safia says, what is propagated as *shariat* [Islamic religious law] is what we follow. But these provisions of the *shariat* are not in consonance with the Quran. *Shariat* is that which is or rather should be inspired by the Quran. BMMA's exertions have been made to bring the practices of the community on par with what is laid out as principles in the Quran. Quran upholds the dignity and personality of the women. While the community accentuates man's rights and women's responsibility, the Quran infact promulgates men's responsibility and women's rights. But the community emphasis wins as women continue to fulfill her responsibilities towards her husband and her family while he continues to enjoy all his rights, right to educate, right to earn, right to polygamy, right to higher share of inheritance and till recently right to unilaterally divorce his wife.

Classical jurists have also misinterpreted certain Quranic verses in favour of men. The verse, which seems to privilege men, actually should be read as 'some people are privileged over some' and not as 'men are privileged over women'. Also, in sum total the genders are treated equally, although in some verses it may seem that men are privileged and, in some women, seem to be privileged.

In the case of marriage too, the question about accepting the marriage is first asked to the woman. Only

if she says yes, can the question be asked to the man. If she says no, the marriage just cannot happen. In the case of *mehr* [dower] too, only she has the right to decide the amount. But in reality, it is the parents who decide the amount. Also, it must be given to her at the time of marriage, but in reality, most women don't receive it. Quran in fact says the *mehr* can be heap of gold. It means there is no limit to it but in reality, men try to give as minimum as possible.

Both men and women have the right to *talaak* and *khula*. A very thoughtless and irresponsible argument was given by the AIMPLB [All India Muslim Personal Law Board] that if men do not get to divorce their wife, they would start killing them. The qazis in fact say that till he does not give his consent the wife cannot be divorced. So, by their own argument can we say that if women are not able to give *khula*, she should also go around killing the husband?! Quran has very clearly mentioned that even women have the right to separation from her husband.

Islam puts no restriction on women's employment and yet in the community it is said that she cannot go out of the house, she must remain in purdah. Hazrat Ayesha was so educated that she was a teacher to many *alims*. But in our community, women are not supposed to get education. She also led the army when Hazrat Usman was assassinated. She was active in politics. So inspite of this legacy, the community continues to treat women as nothing and that too in the name of Islam. Islam is soft and flexible for women. It has given her all rights and freedoms.

Rights given in Islam also gets impeded by the community fears and phobias which gets enhanced by

the communal forces. Noorjahan Diwan shares that with rising Islamophobia and Muslim hatred, Muslim men think that women are not safe. As a result, restrictions on her mobility are placed. Hindu right-wing youth also make statements that they would marry Muslim girls and bring them in the Hindu fold. Scared of such statements, Muslim men are wary of sending their girls for higher education. Nobody has a right to decide whom a girl should marry. But such statements scare the community and also impedes genuine inter religious marriages.

At the same time, Noorjahan Diwan observes that men have understood the new triple divorce law. They are scared of the law as well as have become aware of the Quranic injunctions regarding divorce. As a result, the triple divorce incidences have also gone down.

Like most other ordinary Muslims, BMMA leaders also gain strength from the spiritual and ritualistic aspects of Islam. Naseem gains peace and strength by reading the Quran and *Yaseen Shareef*, doing her namaaz and fasting. Moreover, she believes strongly that each gender has equal rights; right to pray, right to educate and right to live.

The challenge before Islam is that Muslims are devoid of information and knowledge. People wrongly believe that whatever the *alim*, mufti says is right. In one of the meetings in Bhopal, one young man said to Safia, you cannot say anything against *alims* and muftis. He asked do you know how exalted is the status of the *alims*? He said if there is one person who keeps awake all night and prays to god and on the other hand you have an *alim* who sleeps the whole night, and yet the status of the

alim will be higher. Such blind faith impedes a person's own judgment. One must do one's own study and not just blindly believe in what the mufti says. In the Quran, Allah keeps saying; use your mind and intellect; think. We as humans, have the ability to think and discern and the ability to express. So why do we not use our own intellect but simply run to *alims* seeking all answers? Why do we behave as if we are *kam-akl* [less intelligent] and blindly believe in what the mufti says?

Farhat's understanding of challenges before Islam stems from fact that Muslims are not believers but are mere followers. They are not practicing believers in the real sense. Their belief is confined to believing that no matter how bad you behave, if you seek forgiveness from God, you go to heaven. These myopic beliefs will not take the community anywhere. The best practices of Prophet Mohammed and the best of Islam – all depends on the individual as to how she or he can execute it in their own life. And that is no magic, it requires conscious and consistent and honest efforts. In the best of Prophetic tradition, can we live and let others live?

The biggest challenge before Muslims, according to Noorjahan Diwan and Niyazmeen is the lack of right information and the complete stranglehold of the maulanas, which has severely impeded their independent thinking. Instead of making the women aware of her rights, they actually hide it from her. It is crucial to reclaim Islam from its so-called custodians. These set of people have ruined the fair name of Islam. In the name of *shariat* they have not just destroyed the lives of so many women and families, they have also brought a bad name to Islam. The damage is so deep that we will need many future generations to clear the mess.

The roots of the conservatism go deep and hence efforts to undo will also have to be long drawn and sustained. While women in other communities have gone ahead and taken great strides, Muslim women are still tied to the tethers. Amongst many books giving instructions to women, Niyazmeen has read, '6 Sinful Women'. She says these books have all kinds of instructions for women, that she should be under the veil, that she must obey her husband. Everything written in that book goes against the women. It is these books that we need to call out for their misogyny.

Rahima shares her experience in West Bengal where a large number of children coming under the scanner of the juvenile justice board are Muslims. She is inspired by the core values of Islam; equality, justice, wisdom, kindness, knowledge and compassion but at the same time she is able to see the disconnect between these values and the reality of Indian Muslims. Muslim children below 18 indulge in a lot of petty crime and even bigger crimes. To add to this, she was told that 80% of women who work as prostitutes are from the Muslim community. She felt very bad about it. They don't have skills; they don't have work or financial resource. There is so much of poverty and destitution. She strongly feels that women must have livelihood skills; they must earn enough to support themselves.

She feels Muslims don't know much about the world nor do they know much about their religion. There is nothing to guide them on the right path. And poverty is so acute that survival makes them do illegal activities. She feels it is the responsibility of the liberal progressive members of the community to guide them and show them the way. And it is not just the responsibility of the

Muslim community. The entire society must work for their economic empowerment. As a community and as a society we must set up more institutions for women's support.

Right from its inception, BMMA has been in the forefront in highlighting the incongruence between the practices of the community and the fair Quranic injunctions in favour of women. While we spend our entire lives reading or rather reciting the Quran, we have not taken trouble to understand the Quran. BMMA took the initiative to understand what it says to women, for women. Innumerable training programmes, IEC material, workshops, public hearings and seminar were held across the country to propagate the gender equality message ingrained in the Quran. These self learning processes made BMMA leaders know and understand that Islam has inspired many to propagate right to property, right to education, right of choice and right to marriage and separation. With persistent and consistent education, Muslim women are today able to recite verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter on what holds in the Quran for women, so much of which we were unaware off.

Education only can help us come out of the cesspool of our own making. In these times of Islamophobia, the challenge before Muslims is the lack of education. Nishat points out, 'the first verse of Quran talks of education, *iqra*. It does not tell us to do *roza* or *namaz* or *zakat* or *fitra* – but talks of education'. Khatoon reminiscences, 'there is a strong legacy of Prophets life for us to emulate; how he respected women, how he treated his own daughter, how he respected his wife. And see how the community treats its women?' It does not follow the true tenets of the religion. Niyazmeen says, 'Islam accorded

many rights to women, which were unheard of that time, so where did it disappear? After Prophet Mohammed's death, the community did not follow his footsteps, all the goodness that got generated just got lost. And instead all maleficent practices, which never existed in Islam, got added with time. It is important to eradicate those practices, which actually did not even exist and had no sanction of Islam at all. And it is our job to do that'.

There is no willingness to understand, to know. And because there is no knowledge, it is not possible to challenge the patriarchal religious leadership. Women can become qazi, women can give azaan, and women can do everything, provided they believe that they can. Women today are challenging norms despite so many restrictions on them. Men have done so much disservice to women in the name of religion.

Thankfully the Shaheen Baug experience has made the men realize the capabilities of women. All those who pushed her back are the ones who are putting her forward. Men are using the shoulders of women to fight their battles with a fascist state. And when their purpose is served, she would be asked to step back. As long as the community does not treat its women equally and without discrimination, if women are not considered equal partners, if they are not involved, till such time it is difficult for the community to progress. Our education, our mindset and our perspectives must become liberal.

Mariya says her relationship with Islam, with Allah has always been very personal. She believes Islam is gender just, she believes her Allah, believes in equality and therefore she calls herself an Islamic Feminist. For her at the core of Islam lies values of justice, love,

peace, equality, piety, honesty, humility, kindness and knowledge and if one is able to imbibe these in them, one can get close to God. She tries to imbibe them in her life as much as realistically possible.

A lot of us while growing up are taught to fear God. Mariya personally believes that it is love that will keep her believing in God and his mercies. Fear is short lived, love is eternal. She had written somewhere earlier that, 'I remember listening to older women on so many instances tell me that if I did or did not do something I would burn in the fire in hell for eternity, or that there would be snakes in my grave after I was buried. My mother, in contrast, would use love for God as a reason for me to do better in life. An example which has worked for me still, is my belief in not wasting even a grain of food. As young kids, my mother would always compare our plates with heaven, while we ate. She would say that just as you would not want heaven to be left dirty, your plates should be clean and with no wastage of food, so take as much as you can finish and finish all that you have taken, for God loves those who understand hunger and do not waste food. Till date, I cannot tolerate wastage of food and do not indulge in any as much as possible.'

INDIA AND INDIAN MUSLIM WOMEN



In one voice the BMMA leadership reposed its faith in the constitution of the country. The constitution has ensured rights for women, for minorities, for the poor, for all. India is a largest democracy and it works on the basis of its Constitution. Jeibunnisa says, 'Irrespective of where we live, what language we speak, what religion we follow – this country takes care of everyone'. Each of them is truly inspired by the Indian Constitution and its values of equality, justice, fraternity, freedom, democracy, socialism and secularism. India is the most beautiful country and examples are given of this country, of its syncretic culture, of its diversity, and the fact that so many different kinds of people are staying together with love and acceptance. This aspect of the country must be preserved and people who are in power must get rid of the poison of hatred which they themselves have sown. India is beautiful because of its values and principles. Only if that is preserved than can we live in peace. Right now the biggest challenge as mentioned by Naseem is how do we reverse the downfall of Constitutional values and principles? And this is

exacerbated by, as Farhat says, absence of visionary leaders, high rate of illiteracy, poverty and corruption.'

Over a period of time, the Constitutional values of secularism and socialism have been gradually eroded. The economic policies of the last 3 decades have eroded our socialist, pro-poor principles, completely devastating the values of a welfare state and a mixed economy. The pandemic resulting in the reverse migration of the informal sector workers has revealed the large underbelly of vast swathes of daily wage earners which have no place in a heartless, profiteering, extorting capitalist state. High unemployment rate coupled with increasing communalization of society have torn apart the fabric of the country.

As we write, this country is going through a tough phase and values of secularism are at stake. If this process is not halted, then religion will become the basis of citizenship. In fact, it did by law when the Citizenship Amendment Act [CAA] was passed followed by the preparation of the nationwide roll out of National Population Register [NPR] and a National Register of Citizenship [NRC] making religion as the basis for citizenship. The entire country was in the grip of that fear, especially the poor who at the best of times are not able to provide documentary proof of their legal existence. The entire process in the garb of citizenship is targeting the Muslims who were scared that they might just simply be put in detention camps as foreigners.

Slowly the mindset is being made to change. Religion is becoming the basis of living and also a tool of discrimination. This is the biggest challenge, which can prove to be very dangerous, if it is not stopped

now. Safia says, 'the Constitution of the country says that if you are born here, you are a citizen. But now even that is being challenged and is used to target the community. Our forefathers and mothers have been born here. Our ancestors have laid down their lives for the independence of the country. This country belongs to everyone, every Indian irrespective of his or her religion. 'After 72 years of independence I will have to prove through the draconian NRC/CAA whether I am an Indian or not? The values of the constitution need to be preserved and not destroyed. When my rights are ensured by the Constitution and the country, who are these leaders or political power holders to take that away from me?' How do we prove that we are Indians, when 99% do not have the documents that are required? So the biggest challenge remains till the government does not take back this law.

There is a very concerted effort especially by the media houses to villainize the Muslim community. The poison of Muslim hatred, which has been consistently fed to the large masses, is finally showing up in daily interactions and even in times of the pandemic too, it does not abate. There is social ostracism, shunting out of Muslims, lynching and killings without remorse and without the fear of law. Pakistan appears to be the favourite destination of all those who hate Muslims. Nishat says, it may be for them but not for the Muslims of the country. She says, 'This is our country, we do *sajda* [*prostration*] on this soil, five times a day, our flesh and blood come from this soil, when we die, we are cleaned and buried and we become part of this soil, who else is?'

But Nishat also points out that as a community we have also to be faulted and part of the reason for being

treated like this lies with us as a community. This fault within the community is also part of the larger politics. Muslims don't tire of saying, that they are the best, and their religion is the best. As a community it is traditional and supremacist. It wants to be known by the outfits worn; the word '*kafir*' is used for people of other faiths. Many speeches are made which give out a wrong signal to the other communities. Because of the idiocy of some, the entire community is targeted. Noorjahan Diwan says that as a community we should not be concerned about what is happening in Pakistan or Saudi Arab. Islam clearly states be loyal to the country where you stay and follow its rules and regulations. Our focus should be to take our own country and people forward and as we move ahead we must help to retain its syncretic culture.

Muslim women today speak to the state and its stakeholders, 'the country lags behind because of the politics of hatred and exclusion and we are losing face before the world. Muslims are doing their best in all the fields, they are part of the large informal sector, and they are part of the film industry, music, and sports. They are taxpayers and do everything that is done by other citizens, then why this hate and inability to trust their loyalty?' asks Nishat.

Khatoon sums up the year 2020, which is like the culmination of that has gone wrong. The state has truly mismanaged the lives of its people. Policies of demonetization, NPR, NRC and laws like CAA have scared people. She says, 'women come to my centre and ask, *aapa* what will happen now, where will we go, what will happen to our property, will we be sent to the detention centres, what about the documents that we lost in the floods last year? These questions are haunting the

poor and especially the Muslims giving them sleepless nights'. She continues, 'it is the state's responsibility is to alleviate poverty, provide employment opportunity, stop religious bigotry and work for the betterment of people'.

Rahima brings in the Constitution here as a panacea for our national problems. 'Save Constitution' must be our important movement in the coming days. She says, 'as BMMA we have worked towards spreading awareness about the Constitution, that work is very crucial. This awareness must happen in school and colleges, madrasa. Everyone should know about the Constitutional values'.

Niyazmeen brings in women's education. She says, 'women must get education. Women's leadership must emerge stronger. When a woman gets education, the entire family is educated. If women are not educated, neither the community, nor the country can progress. Every child must get an opportunity to study and go forward. No opportunity should be denied just because someone is from a particular caste or religion. Everyone will have an opportunity to development and gain merit'.

Niyazmeen along with Nasreen strongly feel that caste system is deeply entrenched in our society, which is not the case in other countries. It is one of the main reasons why as a country we are not able to develop. Caste has become a rallying point for elections and development takes a back seat. According to Mariya, the challenges before the country today is tackling communalism and the increasing hate and bigotry against minority communities, religious and caste oppressed both.

Nasreen sums up neatly by saying that we as Indians must work for strengthening the values of the Indian Constitution; we must protect our fundamental rights

and fulfill our fundamental duties and work towards constructing a secular community. The challenges as we move ahead in our national life are poverty, communal violence, and gender inequality and caste system. As Muslim women we must focus our energies in addressing these issues.

POLITICS OF HATE AND INDIAN MUSLIM WOMEN



There is a unanimous understanding in the entire BMMA team that the state has failed its citizens and it has played a primary role in abetting the communal conflagration. India is famously described as having a syncretic culture or as we call it the '*ganga jamuni tehzeeb*'. In Tamil Nadu for instance, says Jeibunnisa, there is a *dargah* next to a *mandir* in practically all its villages. People pray together and they celebrate festivals, which have become common to the village. This is the experience across the country where people stay in peace irrespective of their religious differences. All BMMA leaders have good relationship with people of other faith. They share their joys and sorrows, their feelings and thoughts, their views on practically everything. They receive suggestions and support and solidarity from them.

Some of the BMMA leaders also have had inter-religious marriage and that has never deterred them in their work. They believe in the sanctity of all religions.

In fact, they have received total support not only from their spouses but also from their family, which is crucial for continuing the work. Nishat's two daughter in laws are both Hindus and she enjoys and loves this diversity within the house. All of these families celebrate all festivals, be it *Eid*, *Diwali*, *Dussehra*, *Shab Baraat* or observing *Moharram*. Their children are exposed to shared humanity and joy in living with diverse cultures. These children will never ever end up having any community prejudice as they grow up. Though it has not been easy as the larger community did object and criticized them for their bold step. They were called anti-Islamic and in fact their spouses were branded Hindu right wing. But with time acceptance happened. In fact, the least resistance came from the poor communities where they worked. They welcomed their husbands with open arms, understanding and respecting their decisions. Niyazmeen says, there is nothing much you can do about people who criticize you and even go to the extent of sending you to hell. She takes people who are willing to come along her path, accept her for what she is. All those who connect at the human level will always come along, she says.

All BMMA leaders have beautiful official and personal relationship with women of other faith. They work together as team members; they collaborate with each other through different forums and programmes. They celebrate together religious and national festivals, sharing delicacies and visiting each other. Safia says, every Eid, biryani made by her is eagerly awaited by her friends and colleagues. They sing and dance and picnic together and also fight and make up. At times their most trusted colleague is from the other faith, irreplaceable.

They see not the religion but the work done, the support shared and solidarity experienced. Many non-Muslims have expressed solidarity and support to BMMA leaders in their work on law reform. They are able to see, what most can't, which is the real impact of work. They can see the much-needed push in the direction of change. Rahima says, the support of non-Muslim friends and colleagues is genuinely encouraging and keeps the team going.

Nasreen shares a heart touching incident. She does not have her parents. At the time of her marriage, her non-Muslim friends supported her a lot. She never felt alone. They organized her marriage. At the time of her pregnancy too, they took care of her. They organized the baby shower programme called *satwasa*. When she was admitted in the hospital for delivery, they were there for her. She says, because of their sisterhood, she is alive.

Mariya has grown up with upper caste Hindu friends. When one is a child one overlooks subtle instances of discrimination, with age and maturity better understanding of how identity plays a role in how people behave with you, also shapes better. She has lost a lot of her earlier friendships, because a lot of friends she made in college and school have been brainwashed by the hindutva understanding of who and what Muslims are. However, along the way she has also found alliance in a lot of non-Muslim friends and colleagues who have stood by her through thick and thin. They check on her often to see if she is doing ok. One of her best friends is a Dalit feminist. She is lucky to be associated with women who in difficult times have not just stood as allies but have supported her or the cause that they were

a part of, right till the end. She does not harbour biases but is pained to see how a lot of whom she perceived to be educated and enlightened openly display their Islamophobia and hate, especially using social media platforms.

What is going Wrong

The ghettoization process of Muslims is complete. Muslims and Hindus are staying separately when some decades back they were immediate neighbours. Now people are scared to enter each other's enclaves or ghettos. Friends have parted ways or atleast have stopped visiting each other, especially so in the times of communal tension. Muslims have moved in from mixed communities into dense Muslim ghettos. This ghettoization is also seen in virtual world where school friends on what's app group spew hatred, the same friends with whom we spend the best years of our life. The underlying prejudice against each other and the division is now out in the open. While earlier the role of spreading the communal poison was done by the Hindu right wing organisations, off late that role is played by media. And it was for all to see during the COVID-19 pandemic when minorities were blamed for the spread of the virus.

Farhat thinks that we get very easily swayed away. If we had been truly educated, we would have applied our mind and would have thought over an issue thoroughly and then taken a decision for ourselves whether that is ok or not. But we believe in the propaganda, which peddles hate. Before drawing conclusions, a person's responsibility is to turn over that propaganda again and

again and seek the truth. This is neither done by the majority nor by the minority.

Seeds of poison sowed many decades back and which were nurtured or rather allowed to be nurtured are unfortunately bearing fruits now. The increasing attacks on the Muslims, through individual lynching and genocidal community attacks, the unconstitutional arrests of Muslim students and other activists' points to a fascist ultra nationalist brutal state power using paid media to unleash a narrative of violence. Hatred and communal vitriol that was hushed and under the carpet is now openly fanned leading to justified killings. Over decades the community has not only been physically ghettoized but also emotionally and mentally. Social ostracism in the form of not renting out homes to Muslims is not a secret anymore. There are many hidden and open discriminatory practices that the community has been facing for a long time. This surged during the COVID-19 pandemic when in some places there was an open boycott call given for Muslim vegetable vendors. The *tablighi jamaat* was projected as a the major source of spread of the virus when at the same time there were many such gatherings by other religious and political groups as well. This demonization is now overt and happening. Whether it is the poor and the uneducated or the rich or the middle class. The polarization is complete.

Even NRC/CAA was brought in to target the community. Generations of Muslims belong to this land and yet are asked to prove their citizenship. Not just Muslims, with the passing of the CAA, all Indians are technically foreigners who have to prove their Indianness as legal citizens. Only Hindus from only three neighbouring countries can be made Indian citizens.

Such a distorted and perverse version of citizenship of a great civilization like India is abhorrent to say the least. A process like NRC, which devastated the Assamese, is planned to be rolled out through the country, which will essentially and practically put all the poor on the roads. It's a devious anti-poor agenda using Muslim shoulders to fire upon. All institutions of governance have been usurped and made complaint for a fascist state.

Although there has been a concerted attempt to demonize the community by many state and non-state actors, the common people themselves are also to be held responsible. They have divided themselves according to religion. If people start using humanity as a lens and not religion, then most issues of division would not occur. Even in a pandemic, basic human connect is not lost. Muslims are giving last rites to their Hindu brethren. But in a big way that perspective is getting lost. We are not able to see human beings as human beings first. Even the *tablighi* issue, the focus is how to blame the community. The focus is not how to resolve the issue.

The larger goal of the communalization and other anti-citizen processes is to cede total control of the economy to the capitalists for profiteering. The resources held by the toiling poor, farmers, small merchants, laborers, their incomes, their lands, their properties can be then usurped for propelling the world global capitalist agenda of amassing disproportionate wealth for greed. These policies are meant to dispossess the communities of their wealth and land. This is a global phenomenon as more and more right-wing capitalist governments come to power with brute force, pliant and paid media, and subversion of all other check-n-balance institutions.

Even democratic processes have been compromised and in fact democratic processes are being used for furthering right-wing capitalist agenda.

The state does not like it when people come together irrespective of caste or religious identity. It uses its power to divide people and sow the seeds of hatred. Against the NRC process the entire country had united but the state did not lose any opportunity to pull people apart and not fight common battle together. There is a fear that the COVID pandemic will be used against the ordinary people by unscrupulously gathering data and then using it against them to deprive them of their citizenship.

The majority community in India, and a large part of them have given in to the politics of Hindutva hate, believes Mariya. When liberals from majority community tell her that countries where Muslims are in a majority behave like the majority behaves in India, she tells them that unlike those countries, India's ethos are based on the pillars of secularism.

Minority Responsibility

All actors, including the victims contribute to the problem when it assumes gigantic proportions. As Muslims, the community too must be open to acknowledging its share of contribution to the problem. Since independence, the community was largely led by religious leaders who played a major role in keeping the community and the women backward. The emerging middle class with education and some amount of prosperity did not challenge the regressive, patriarchal leadership, which kept on dragging the community

into a cesspool that it is in right now. The rich of the community was not just class divided but also caste divided with the so-called *pasmanda* left to fend for themselves. The social consciousness which makes the have section work for the progress of the have-nots did not really develop because of the strong stranglehold of the clerics over the mind of the middle class. Naseem says, the government is responsible for the ruptured social fabric, and that is a given. It has different sets of laws for Hindus and Muslims. But we as a community also are responsible. The community is not educated, it does not have awareness, it does not know how to work with others, how to interact with others.

The community did not think of its women who were reeling with insecurity within their homes with practices like triple divorce, polygamy, halala and underage marriages. She never got the space to air her views because of the fear of the clerics who had total political support. Where was the liberalism, modernism, freedom and justice that propels a community forward? A large part of the community did acquire education but were they wise, were they open to questioning ruthless power, were they willing to challenge patriarchy in the garb of religion?

There is a reluctance to change, to reform, to adopt new ways of thinking, to observe the strides made by other communities and learn from them. There has been too much emphasis on religious education. Every issue, every problem, every event is first analyzed from a religious perspective. Every issue need not be even looked at from a religious lens. But the community has given undue importance to that perspective.

The community has also not used its financial strength to empower the community. It has not been able to influence its rich section to turn to philanthropy in a way that brings about institutional changes within the community. Have we made enough schools, colleges, orphanages which are modern and professionally managed? Do we have an organized distribution of zakat for large scale structural changes like may be setting up community kitchens for the poor?

How much of our elite have influenced the political marginalization of the community? Why inspite of being 15% of the population the community has not been able to get state benefits for itself? The vote bank politics has benefitted the political parties more than the community. Within the community too only a fraction of political and religious elite got state patronage in return for their votes. This never got translated in benefits to the larger community. Why do Urdu medium schools have a pathetic standard and quality? Why do Muslim ghettos not have well run public health posts and clinics? Why do our political representatives not ensure corruption free PDS in Muslim ghettos? Why are we still in a charitable mode of development where a large section thinks that paying annual zakat is enough to ameliorate the conditions of the community? Why are the political and economic and religious elite not able to influence the media vitriol against the community? Why doesn't the community have its own channel, which is modern and liberal and is not constantly under the shadow of adhering to religious principles set by the regressive clerics? Why are our elite not able to counter the anti-Muslim media onslaught? Counter narrative voices if and when they emerge, why are they criticized

and shunted out? Why did a certain section of the community not able to appreciate the efforts of BMMA for law reform and social justice? We seek benefits as a minority from a liberal, secular democratic polity but refuse to extend the same to the women members of the community? Why has the community not able to come out of the stranglehold of the clerics and demanded better laws for protection of women's rights? Why were scholars like Dr. Engineer hounded and attacked and why did the larger secular Muslims not come out in large numbers to support him? An honest answer is required here and deep inward plunge into ones consciousness and brutal honesty required here. Have we even once asked ourselves, why are we such easy targets? Why are other communities not open for such viciousness? Is something wrong with us too? It requires courage to ask these questions in such times of murders and killings of Muslims, but we have to ask or be prepared to remain in the other-blaming game and suffer.

The other mistake that the community has done which is to operate out of a victim perspective. It has neither done an honest introspection of its own follies nor has it countered the state repression from a citizen's perspective. Till the opposition to NPR/NRC/CAA, we remained the poor Muslim victim. It is only during the NRC protests that Muslims started to talk about citizenship, constitutional rights, democratic values and other modern values. Only a while back when Muslim women spoke of Article 14, equality and justice and constitutional protection as citizens, they were termed right wing Hindu supported women. This hypocrisy is to be faced in the eye. Do we have the courage to do it?

The community has been a blind follower of its ignorant clerics. They will go to them for seeking answers for questions, which can be easily answered by themselves just by using one's intelligence. Why is the community so dumb that it cannot use its own intellect? Why everything has to be told and instructed upon? Every word uttered by the clerics goes unquestioned, why, for instance, did the women follow the fatwas of a Bhopal cleric who in one of the riot situations told them not to go to bazaar to buy eid clothes. Women meekly submitted themselves to the fatwa. Some years back was a fatwa in gudiyas and Imrana's case. These and umpteen ridiculous fatwas mocking the intelligence of people and mocking Islam itself have been doing rounds but except for Muslim women's organization, the larger community remained indifferent and even accepting the fatwas, simply because they are touted by clerics who are accepted as repositories of religious knowledge. As a result, we have two types of Islam, one for the men with all the privileges and one for the women, with all the trappings of discrimination, all rights of men assured and all responsibilities of women upheld. Islam, a religion of equality and justice reduced to a religion of privileges for the man. Using those privileges men have set boundaries for women and women for many decades now, refused to cross those boundaries.

It now falls on Muslim women and specifically on BMMA to even reach out to the young men in the community with an alternative narrative of bringing in the real Islam. The youth need to re-educated. They must know the rights of women, they must know their responsibilities they must know that the so-called privileges have no resonance in the Quran. The life of

the Prophet was a reflection of honesty, austerity, justice, humanity and kindness. Muslim youth will need to reorient themselves to the fact that they cannot allow false claims of religiosity to harm and trouble others.

As a community we lack education and understanding. The so-called leaders convert this lack of understanding [*badakli*] into propaganda and that is used then against the entire community. Farhat is also wary of the community's commitment to women's empowerment. When issues like triple divorce, entry into masjid, and other women's issues are taken up they don't want the women to come out and support but when it came to Shaheen Bagh, the same community is now furthering the women to fight it out. The double standards of the community are the main cause of our failure. We are not united. We may celebrate one *eid*, believe in one book, one *rasool* [messenger] etc. but we have not even understood the essence of Islam. This fundamental change must happen.

Islamic supremacism must be abandoned. The truly secular amongst us must also question our own follies and regressive mindset. It is not enough to call out on the evils of Hindu fundamentalism. It is also equally important to call out Islamic fundamentalism. While we condemned the demolition of Babri masjid, we could have equally vociferously condemned the demolition of the Bamiyan buddhas in Afghanistan. While we condemned and rightly so the killing of Muslims in Burma, we must also condemn the killing of Ahmediyas in Pakistan or the Shias in other parts of the world. We are divided amongst sects and each sect is more supremacist than the other. Each is more Muslim

than the other. If we have prejudices amongst our own religion, are we not guilty of having prejudices for those who do not profess Islam? Let's not delude ourselves that we are also not prejudiced. Have we not heard the word, *kafir* for people of other faith? Do we not express our sole custody and monopoly over *jannat* [heaven]?

'I do not really know where as a community we have gone wrong but I know for a fact that we could have done better if we were more organized as a community', says Mariya. Her interaction with her Dalit friends has shown how being organized and having a unified voice, in atleast come issues can lead to success. Laws like the SC/ST PoA Act, though has a long way to go as far as implementation is concerned, the fact that a law like that exists, atleast on paper, is a big achievement for all those marginalized, to learn from.

What needs to be Done

The tool used to spread hatred is the same tool that must be used to spread love and compassion. Inter community relations must be strengthened. Media must focus on what the Muslims do for the relief and rehabilitation of all communities. But because Muslims do not have political power, they also do not have the means to show their other side. Muslim representation in media houses, in political arena must increase. We must also fight for population wise reservation.

Muslims must take lead in building bridges with the other community. With dialogue and conversations all difficulties can be resolved. All hatred can turn to love and acceptance if we talk to each other. We must also

be ready to bring up the uncomfortable questions about the community that we know haunt the people of other faith. What do they think of us? What do we think of them? Is it possible to work together after acknowledging our differences?

As human beings just as love, even hate can be nurtured. If young people are made to believe that the other person is not good enough because of a different religion or caste, then the children will grow up with those biases. It is the responsibility of adults to nurture love and compassion in the children. Learning to respect and love each other is essential if hatred has to be overcome.

In her centre, Khatoon does not allow anyone to say *gair-Muslim* to anyone who wants to refer to people who are not Muslims. A kind of othering and exclusion happens when we use such terms. During the interview the country was going through a pandemic and she reached out to many non-Muslims families with relief work.

The government must take full responsibility of the communal pogrom. It must intervene in matters where masjids are being attacked, where minority community members are targeted. This must not happen. But as Muslims we must also reach out to the state as citizens and demand security. We must engage with other civil society initiatives to build bridges even with the state. For instance, Khatoon is an active member of the Mohalla Committee Movement Trust since 1995. This initiative is to address the growing communalization through public police interface on a regular basis.

Noorjahan Diwan thinks that as civil society groups we also did not go beyond the ghettos. We never took efforts to get the two communities together. Even NGOs have been myopic working only on a certain issue and nothing else. For instance, if an NGO has to work on the issue of water, it worked only on that without looking at the social dynamics of the community. Nobody really worked on the issue of communal harmony, getting people of all communities together and addressing the myths and prejudices about each other. Youth of both communities are misguided and poisoned against each other. Naseem advices, youth of all communities must engage with each other. Multiple joint initiatives for growth and development can be organized. Youth must also raise their voices against hate and parochialism and speak the language of love and acceptance. Cultural exchange programmes, dispel myths and prejudices by sharing stories and poems, playing and gaming together, creating art together, talking and sharing of dreams and aspirations, knowing rights and gaining knowledge are some of the many initiatives that can be taken.

Mariya was fifteen years old when the Gujarat pogrom took place and she still clearly remembers how that period shaped conversations around communities and their interactions with each other. The pogrom took place, geographically very far away from where she was but the news of the violence, specially that unleashed on Muslim women still rings fresh in her ears. Her second encounter with communal violence against Muslims was in 2013 during the Muzaffarnagar Riots. She left for London to pursue her masters shortly after but her association with the survivors continued as she worked

on a report on the 7 survivors of gang rape, documenting their legal journey through the years and the failure of justice that they faced.

Most recently, in 2020 the Delhi pogroms have left an impact on her which will be etched in her memory and life to come. From trying to help injured persons in hospital, to coordinating relief and rehabilitation and then not being able to intervene as much because of COVID-19, has all been a life changing experience. The special vulnerability of Muslim women in India during communal pogroms and the violence unleashed on them in the name of honour and revenge is something that runs through all of the incidences that she has encountered.

Inter community violence is breaking the secular fabric of this country. Use of social media and the ever-increasing disinformation and fake news is only worsening the already souring relationships between communities. The passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act coupled with the NRC has distanced the communities from each other even more with the Muslim minority community being viewed as the 'other'. The increasing violence against the Muslim community either through mob lynchings in the name of cow vigilanism by hindutva mobs or non-physical forms of violence (twitter had hashtags such as economic boycott of Muslims and crush tablighi spitters that had been trending in India) are a cause of worry and need to be addressed at the earliest.

She has experienced hate and Islamophobia first hand and by different actors. She has faced identity-based discrimination at Amnesty India and resigned

soon after all her complaints were said to hold no ground, despite other colleagues from marginalized backgrounds being witness to similar treatment by the management. She has grown up in a Muslim ghetto in Calcutta and has wished to live in a locality of her choice with basic infrastructure etc. However, whether it was Bangalore or Delhi, every time she went looking for a house, she was asked if she was a Muslim. 4 out of 5 times, she has been denied the housing of her choice because of her identity.

WAY FORWARD



BMMA leaders are very clear about their goals. They have clearly articulated objectives and are already working towards it. This study happened during the COVID-19 pandemic when they were engaged in relief work in their respective cities. All of them had their journey chalked. The immediate future will involve working for the economic rehabilitation of the people, especially women, as pointed out by Jeibunnisa from Tamil Nadu. There would be a strong need for a larger global alliance and campaign for economic justice, as the post-pandemic world will be very different.

The larger goal of continuing to work for the socio-economic-educational development of the community remains clearly etched out. As Nishat Hussain says, it is already happening, as Muslim girls too are becoming IRS, IPS, and IAS officers. 'Each child from the community must get educated, they must reach a position and status in life, and they must get into administration, police, and judiciary'.

Rahima wants to expand her scope of work to reach out to more districts in West Bengal. She wants to start women's bank and also a school for boys and girls.

Nasreen wants to focus on creating more women leaders who will work for communal amity, peace and justice. She wants these leaders to empower the vulnerable communities, to work for gender justice within the community. She wants to learn and teach Indian history and feels the need to update her knowledge. She wants to work towards fulfilling the constitutional values; she wants to live a secular life, she wants to work for the deprived sections her entire life. Such is the commitment from the young leader!!

Safia, Khatoon, Rahima have joined the others in articulating their deep desire to see a codified Muslim family law in the coming days. They want legislation against polygamy, halala and child marriage. They want legislation, which gives equal inheritance rights to women. They want a law in favour of adoption. In short a law, which gives protection to women within the family. As Nishat says, 'her religion is being a woman.'

BMMA leaders also want to empower women and girls with knowledge about their rights in the Quran. Jeibunnisa says, 'the next generation of the community must also use Quran as a tool for empowerment of self and others. Bring yourself up and take people along for a better society'. Safia says, 'she must be treated equally, she must not face discrimination and she must get justice'. Women must think of themselves, not as *paeir ki jooti* [slippers], but as *sar ka taaj* [crown]'

Naseem and Noorjahan Diwan and all other BMMA leaders mention that the most crucial issue haunting everyone is the deteriorating social fabric of the country. The increasing Islamophobia, the increased attack on the Muslim community, the state repression and as this is

being written, the complete breakdown of the economy due the pandemic – all weighs heavily on Muslim women leaders. The politics of hate which have created borders within the communities must end and this must be done in collaboration with other civil society groups. Noorjahan wants to go to villages, cities across the country and spread the message of love, harmony and peace.

The leaders shared their personal goals. All of them wanted to read more, understand more, learn new skills and keep pace with the fast changing and growing world, gain more knowledge and understanding of the issues facing the country and the community. As BMMA faces an economic crisis and lack of resources, all the leaders want to focus on raising resources for the work that needs to be done. Without funds it is difficult to carry out goal driven activities.

Rahima wants to strengthen her IT, social media outreach. She wants to further educate her children. Niyazmeen wants her son to turn out to be a good human being. He is a product of inter-religious marriage and so will observe both communities. She hopes for him that he turns out to be a good human being. She herself wants to be a film maker and also act in it. She wants to be a video blogger and reach out to the larger society with a message. Safia wants her children and their children to be happy and achieve success and fulfill their dreams in life.

BMMA leaders have high hopes from the current and future generation. Khatoon wants them to take initiative and fight their own battles. She tells the young ones to live life as per their wish. *Jis ki ladai uski agwai*

[my struggle, my leadership] – this slogan of BMMA must guide their lives. She wants them to be independent, use their strength which God has given to fight for their rights, teach constitutional rights to their children, give them the courage to take the decisions of their life. She tells them not to depend on others. God has given strength, so fight for your rights; teach rights to your children, tell them their rights within the constitution, give them the courage to take the decisions of their own life. Like Khatoon, Farhat wants the nation to grow, the community to grow, and women to grow in strength and power and meet all the challenges head on.

Rahima wants the coming generation to work towards codifying the Muslim law and to work towards strengthening the secular and democratic values of the nation as enshrined in the constitution of the country and to work towards strengthening humanitarian values, care and support for people. She wants reservation for women in the Parliament and Assembly.

Safia wants the next generation to think of others and not just about themselves. She says, ‘always support the good and shun the bad’. Like true Muslims they must know what Islam has in store for them. They must lead their lives in a way that nobody has any complaints with them. The coming generation must work towards empowering Muslim women and work towards making them independent and confident.

Nishat does not want the next generation to tolerate injustice. They must read the books written by BMMA, they must change and reform. As we write our own history, our own achievements, the next generation must read and learn from it.

Niyazmeen wants the youth to focus on its education and growth. Then focus on the country and its development and take part in all its activities. She strongly believes that the day communalism ends in this country, will be the day from which the country takes to the road of progress. Niyazmeen says, 'there is a religion beyond religion which is the religion of humanity. People must stop discrimination on the basis of caste, religion. They must take leadership and take the country forward. In times of crisis everyone must stay together and help each other, just the way they are right now during pandemic'.

Nasreen and Naseem want the fellow generationers to learn and understand Indian history, update their knowledge, sensitize themselves on issues of gender, follow the constitutional values, work with the poor and lead a secular life. The youth must be kept away from hatemongers and an alternative peace education must be done with members of both the communities. Naseem says, 'we are one, we are made by one god, we must stay together in peace'.

Jeibunnisa wants the future generation to use Quran as a tool for empowerment. She wants them to be sensitive and caring and wants them to partner with everybody else for a better world.

Noorjahan Diwan tells the male youth to not confine women to the four walls of the room. Leave the bird free, let her fly the sky. She has a right to live her life as per her wishes.

In her trademark repartee, Farhat wants the youth to be patient and focused. 'in two minutes, no nutritious or healthy food can be prepared'.

Mariya wants her work to speak for itself and through her work wants to be remembered as a strong voice advocating for rights of the most marginalized. She also wants to continue working on issues that affect the Muslim community, especially Muslim women.

ABOUT BMMA

Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Aandolan (BMMA) is an autonomous, secular, rights-based mass organization led by Muslim women which fights for the citizenship rights of the Muslims in India. BMMA was formed in January, 2007.

VISION:

To create conditions within the Indian society where the Muslim community and especially the Muslim women are able to eradicate their own poverty and marginalization and live a life of equality, justice and with respect for human rights.

BMMA BELIEVES IN:

Values of democracy, secularism, equality, non-violence, human rights and justice as enshrined in the Constitution of India. These are our guiding principles in our struggle for justice.

OBJECTIVES:

- To work towards understanding and ameliorating the marginalization of the Muslim community and Muslim women.
- To work towards empowering Muslim women and take steps to ensure their social, economic, political, civil, legal and religious rights.
- To work to uphold the Constitutional principles like equality, liberty, secularism, social justice and democracy.
- To undertake and propagate positive and liberal interpretations of religion which are in conso-

nance with principles of justice, equality, fairness and protection of human rights.

- To take forward the process of legal reforms within the Muslim personal law
- To oppose fascism, exploitative capitalism, communalism, imperialism in all its forms and to support peace, justice and uphold human rights
- To collaborate and build alliance with other movements and networks that are fighting for social equality and human rights.
- To understand the caste hierarchies within the Muslim community and raise the issues of Dalit Muslims. To create an alternative progressive voice within the Muslim community.

The BMMA works for all the rights and duties emanating from the Constitution of India. Over the 13 years the membership has increased to 100,000 in 15 states. Our membership is open to all, including men, who share our vision and mission and are secular.

ACHIEVEMENTS:

- Won the Public Interest Litigation [PIL] in Mumbai High Court and Supreme Court against Haji Ali Dargah Trust for denying entry in the sanctum sanctorum
- PIL against the practice of triple divorce in Supreme Court of India followed by a legislation against the practice of triple divorce directly impacting 80 million Muslim women.
- PIL against polygamy and halala pending in the Supreme Court of India

- Established *Darul Uloom-e-Niswaan* as a centre for learning, training and awareness in Islam. 20 women have been certified as qazis through this institution.
- Set up Karwaan Centres for socio-economic and education development of the Muslim women
- Set up Aurton Ki Shariat Adalats [Legal Aid Centres] for providing legal aid, guidance and mental health counseling to women

