

## MUSLIM WOMEN AND TRADITIONAL EDUCATION IN INDIA IN LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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**Abstract:** An attempt has been made in this paper to understand the nature of education desired for Muslim women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In that period elementary religious education was imparted to all at home, such as recitation of the Quran, and the fundamental religious values of modesty, honesty, respect for elders (adab), duties towards one's parents etc. but higher education and the realm of religious scholarship and authority became the preserves of men alone. The paper therefore looks at attitude of the founders of the Aligarh School towards women's education as these stalwarts by building a discourse on the 'suitable' education for women must have had a bearing on the later experiments for women's education in modern schools. Sir Syed's views definitely are important to consider. The paper takes in detail the study of Deputy Nazir Ahmad's novels, *Mirat-ul-Arus* (Brides Mirror) and *Banat-un-Naash* (Daughter of the Bier) that brings out his concepts of the most suitable education and of what he considered as appropriate matter and curriculum for women's instruction.

**Keywords:** Curriculum, Muslim Women, Traditional Education, Western Education.

**Introduction:** Education for Muslim boys at the Aligarh school was conceived mainly as a break from traditional system. Boys were expected to acquire modern education, in western rational sciences and philosophies, though bound with elements of faith but liberally interpreted so that they could break free of the crushing weight of traditions. In contrast, education for women in its initial phase was also conceived, but was strongly tilted towards safeguarding the family, cultural-religious traditions and not as break from it. Sir Syed appreciated western civilization and western education but considered these bad for Muslim females. In a sort of a defensive reply to the letter to the ladies of Punjab (which also indicate the demand for modern education from the women's side), Sir Syed proclaimed that he was not against the educational development of Muslim sisters and he also wished them progress in life, but he could not support western education for them. The advice for women was therefore to acquire home-based education through traditional pattern. This according to him will be helpful for their rest of the life.[1]

"Aye meri behnon, main apni qaum ki khuwateen ki taleem se beparwah nhi hoon, main dil se unki tarakki ka khuwahaan hon, mujhe jahan tak mukhalfat hai to uss tarikeqa-e-taleem se hai jis ke ikhtiyar krne per is zamane ke kotah andesh haiel hai, main tumhe ye nasihat krta hoon k tum apna purana tareeqa-e-taleem ikhtiyar krne ki koshish karo, wahi tumhare liye deen wa duniya mein bhalaiee ka phal de ga or kaaton mein padne se mehfooz rake ga." [2] (O my dear sister, I do not oppose the education for women, I am also concern the welfare (empowerment) of women, but I strongly resist the system of education which will be adopted

by the modernist. I suggest u to carry on with your traditional education system, only this kind of education will provide you the welfare and security from the evils.)

"Mardo ko jo tumhare liye roti kama kr lane wale hai, zamane ki zaroorat ke munasib kuch bhi ilm ya koi sib hi zabaan seekhne or kaisi hi nayi chal chalne ki zaroorat paish aati ho, magan in tabdeeliyon se jo jo zaroorat taleem ke mutalliq tumhe pehle thi uss mein koi tabdeeli nhi hui" [3] (Men are the bread winners of the family. In the today's modern world men require to learn different kinds of skills and languages, and any kind of life style as well, unlike men there is no need of replacing the traditional education system for you.)

Interestingly, 'modern' and 'western' became fully synonymous while addressing the issue of women's education while its distinctions were highlighted when boys' education was considered. The curriculum for boys clearly spelt out that modernization for men would not be aping the west but would be bound with elements of faith. Besides, the private and public divide, so characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gender ideology of the British rulers and following them their subjects, gets constantly highlighted in this differential scheme of education – for under this men were the breadwinners and women the bread-makers.

It is important to note here the Sir Syed's testimony before the Indian education commission (in 1882). "Those who hold that women should be educated and civilized prior to men are greatly mistaken; the fact is that no satisfactory education can be provided for Mohammadan females until a large number of Mohammadan males receive a sound education. The present state of education among Mohammadan

females is, in my opinion, enough for domestic happiness considering the present social and economic condition of the life of the Mohammadans of India.”[4]

Perhaps Sir Syed analyzed conditions of women of the community for his own cultural location and his mother serving as an inspiration to him. His mother was educated at home and so he considered it possible for woman in purdah to be literate, pious, and an ethical force in her children’s lives.[4] He believed that there was no need of education for Muslim women other than learning at home. However, Azizun Nisha’s[6] situation could not have been compared with other women of Muslim community because it was very difficult to provide that kind of education at home in the second half of the nineteenth century.[7]

Maulvi Nazir Ahmad (1831-1912)[8], a younger contemporary of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, however, was a leading proponent of education of Muslim women. He took the issue with great determination and tried to spread his ideas through his writings. He strongly wanted women to be educated and respected in society but one needs to note also the language of persuasion for education that exhibits strong patriarchal overtones. In *Mirat-ul-Arus* he writes (addressing to women) “oh women! You are the joy of men’s pleasure and beguile their pains. If men could get help from you in great matters, if you had the faculty of common sense for managing great matters, why, men would drink the very water in which they had washed your feet and would make you the enduring crown of their existence... Hence, except reading and writing, there is positively no method by which you can develop your intellects”[9],

At the same time Nazir Ahmad recommends ‘purdah’ for women as he believed this had come to stay and very difficult to go off, so one could in spite of it be educated at home and knows the world from inside. He added “For you there is a little hope of escape from your seclusion. Public opinion and the custom of the country have made retired life behind the purdah obligatory and incumbent upon women and in these days the observance of this institution is more rigid than ever...and while you seated behind the purdah you may make a tour of the whole world. Get knowledge, and without going outside the house you may become acquainted with what has happened in all ages.”[10] So without venturing to go out of home to ‘know the world’ or acquire knowledge is presented as an advantage of the home-bound education. He however also felt that the prevailing system of religious education among Muslim women was not adequate. He writes in the very preface of his novel *Mirat ul-Arus* that “I became convinced that purely religious subjects of study are not suited to the

capacities of children, and that the literature to which my children’s attention was restricted had the effect of depressing their spirits, of checking their natural instincts, and of blunting their intelligence”[11] Elementary religious education was imparted to all at home, such as recitation of the Quran, and the fundamental religious values of modesty, honesty, respect for elders (adab), duties towards one’s parents, etc. But higher education and the realm of religious scholarship and authority became the preserves of men alone.

Nazir Ahmad along with Sir Syed however opposed Khuwaja Gulam-us-Saqlain’s resolution favouring women’s education at the Annual function of the Conference (1894), and made fun of it saying,

“Sir Syed ne farmaya ke maujuda tarz ke madaris mein padh kr ladkiya bad ikhalaq(ill mannered) ho jayegi or unke dost hafiz Dr. Nazir Ahmad delhvi jo us waqt unke pas baithe hue the , unhoone bhi kaha ki miyan tum ladkiyon ke liye madarsa qayam krna chahte ho, angrezi madarse mein baith kr hudr dangiyan ho jayegi”[12] (Sir Syed says, if girls get educated in the modern educational institutions, they will turn ill mannered, adding to this his friend Hafiz Dr. Nazir Ahmad Dehalvi who was setting alongside with him comments, Sir if you established an English educational institution for girls then, they will become badly vociferous).

Nazir Ahmad clearly subscribed to the public - private divide that gets represented in his novel. He considered men as bread earners and for that they should go out from homes to earn living, and women were confined to households to perform domestic duties. “It is a happy thing for women that as a rule they are preserved from the toil of earning livelihood or making money. Look at all the hard work of different kind which is performed by men. One carries huge loads on his head; another brings in fire wood... On the contrary, it is women who do the entire works of housekeeping”[13]

Besides, men attained formal education in maktabas or privately, and ‘Asghari’ who is the main heroine of Nazir’s novel *Mirat ul-Arus* only could pressurize her husband to focus on her studies. On the other hand the heroine encouraged her sister-in-law ‘Mehmuda’ to be perfect in domestic work, as this would help her for the rest of her life. Simultaneously she taught her religious text, some basic mathematics, and small knowledge of the historical, geographical, and scientific facts. “Besides reading and writing, two other arts are very necessary for girls to learn—namely, needle work and cooking”[14] The education should look into better management of the household and child rearing, for ultimately mothers builds and develops children’s character and home is the primary institution for learning. So, “if for no

other reason, for the sake of educating their children it behoves women to get all the culture they can. girls are brought up at home as a matter of course, until they are married, and so are most boys until they turn ten years old, the influence of their mother's character and companionship leaves its mark upon them"[15] It is also important to note here the shift in 'reform' on education for women for their 'children's sake' in the later part of 19<sup>th</sup> century.[16]

Nazir Ahmad while discussing the status of female literacy in Delhi says that it is not the custom in this land to teach reading and writing to the secluded sex, "auraton mein padhne likhne ka charcha is kadar kam hai ke delhi jaise shaher mein agar mushkil se sau sawa sau(100-125) auraton woh bhi shayad harf shanaash nikli bhi to is ko charcha nhi keh sakte"[17] (Among women the habit of reading writing is uncommon to the extent that even in the city like Delhi, among very few literate women we hardly find anyone who can understand the words properly this means that even they are not sensitized.)

Women's traditional education was limited to the household arts; at best, some women from respectable families might learn to read the "translation of glorious Quran and the vernacular treaties on the precepts and doctrines of religion"[18] Nazir Ahmad emphasizes that both men and women are equal in acquiring education. God has not made women to remain illiterate. God has given them wisdom to gain knowledge[19] But on contrary he emphasizes that it is not necessary for women to do too much learning other than acquire the ability to read and write the vernacular. This much of learning will save them from trouble. Either they compelled to disclose their own family matters to strangers Nazir Ahmad tried to convey the message through his novel to all Muslim women, that they may at least learn enough to read and write, so that they can correspond with their male family member who went out of the town to earn their living.[20] They should not therefore disclose family matters to strangers. Another benefit which comes from education according to Nazir Ahmad was that it helps to develop the better understanding of the religion. Nazir Ahmad tried to present an ideal structure of girl's school, its curriculum and its syllabus in both his novel *Mirat ul-Arus* and *Banat un-Nash*. *Mirat ul-arus* intended to teach ethics(akhlaq) and good housekeeping (Khanadari), this book(*Banat un-Nash*) does the same, but only secondary, its primary concern in with scientific knowledge (ma'lumati 'ilmi)"[21]

Through his story of two sisters Akbari and Asghari in *Mirat ul-Arus*, Nazir brings out clearly his concept and usefulness of women's education. Akbari, the elder one is illiterate, ill-tempered absolutely without

any talent got married to Mohd. Aqil who is literate and settle in a job but due to her illiteracy she make a mess of her life soon after her marriage she demands for a separate home and she always misbehaved with others, while Asghari on the other hand is a literate, sweet-tempered and multitalented girl. She got married to the younger brother of Mohd. Aqil, who had not completed his studies but after marriage Asghari well managed his husband's home, gave respect to all. Firstly she saved the home from maid's stealing habit. She arranged a job for his husband with the help of his father and then to make a good use of her leisure time she started a school for girls at her home and at last she arranged her sister-in-law's marriage in a wealthy family. The simple story contrasts the two characters in obvious way making Asghari the role model for sharif women to emulate. The message is clear that ultimate happiness in married life is through fidelity love, devotion and efficient performance of household duties

In another novel *Banat un-Nash*, Nazir Ahmad presented an ideal school for girls, where they learn all skills and moral conduct which will be useful for girls in future married life. He presents Asghari as an ideal teacher in girl's school, where she with help of her sister-in-law (Mehmuda) inculcates good habits and ethical values in their students. They designed curriculum and content of teaching in a way which would help students to develop knowledge on basic facts of history, general science, geography and basic calculations. The stories taught were interposed with message, by which they conveyed general facts to their learners. Playing with dolls, managing dolls house, making doll dresses was an important part of their lessons through which they coached them in cooking, sewing, home management and preparation of household budget etc.

At the end of his story Nazir Ahmad gives a detail description of an ideal syllabus for girl's school. "Husn Ara learned to read the Quran, and, since she regularly read two sections every day, knew it as if by heart. As for Urdu, she could read and write with no difficulty. Even her hand writing was fair. Urdu translation of the Quran, *Kanz al-musalla*, *Qiyama nama*, *Rah i Nijat*, *Wafat nama*, the story of the King of Rum, the story of *Sipahizada*, the miracle of the King of Yamen, *Risala i Maulud Sharif*, *Mashariq alAanwar*—these were the religious books that she had read. In addition she had studied the fundamentals of arithmetic up to the fractions, the geography and the history of India, *Chand Pand*, *Muntakhab al-Hikaya*, and *Mirat ul-Arus*. She could read Urdu news papers. In addition to reading and writing, she had learned all the arts that a women needs to manage a household. She had also learned as many useful facts as would be sufficient to add

comfort and pleasure to the rest of her life. But what she learned from books was only a thousandth part of what she had learned from Asghari and other students.”[22]

Interestingly, he makes note of capacities in women and their ability to rise but also considers this to be exceptional thing for them. He writes, “no doubt god created women a bit weaker than man, but he gave her hands and feet, ears and eyes, wit (‘aql), understanding (samajh) and memory (yad) equal to any man. The boys make use of these gifts and become ‘alim, hafiz, hakim, craftsmen, artisans, experts in every art and craft. The girls waste their time in playing with the doll and listening to stories, and remain devoid of hunar (talent; art). However, those women who recognized the values of time and put it to good use became famous in the world just like men. For example, Nurjahan Begum, Zebanisa’begum, or in our days, Nawwab Sikandar Begum

and Queen Victoria, who have run, not just some small household, but an entire country, even the world.”[23] These have been the exceptional women.

**Conclusion:** Education of Muslim women in late nineteenth century was limited to vernacular and traditional education, girls to be tutored or taught in small groups in the zenana; this allowed them to maintain purdah and to avoid endangering their own or their families’ reputations by going out in public. Reformer like Sir Syed Ahmad did not support formal or western education for girls; he strongly believed there is no need of such education for girl till large no. of male population achieved sound education. Nazir Ahmad showed more interest towards women’s education, and he realized that the older, home-based vernacular education was not enough for the development of women. He thought to only revitalize this traditional home-bound education but not departing from it significantly.

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