

Behind the Veil in Khuldabad, India: 14th Century Sufi Saints, 21st Century Islamic Reformers, and Muslim Women

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In January of 2009, I traveled to India to interview women in Khuldabad, a small Muslim town in the state of Maharashtra, about religious customs and rituals. With the help of my multilingual friend and colleague from this area, Surekha Shah, I interviewed twenty-nine women using a blend of Urdu and English. These women¹, from different economic and social levels, invited me into their homes. Their dwellings ranged from single, earthen floor rooms to family compounds built around ancient courtyards housing several generations. The rough streets and well-worn pathways, bounded by high stone and wooden walls, give the feel of a small medieval town with goats and people and bicycles meandering through, but the autorickshaws and state buses belching blue-purple smoke anchor one in the more nuanced mix of centuries that is Khuldabad. Behind the purdah of walls and veils, women welcomed me with warmth and openness. And each time I left their homes, they graciously invited me to return.

The focus of my research was to gain firsthand knowledge of women's religious traditions in this ninety-nine percent Muslim town established in the fourteenth century by north Indian Muslim saints with names identifying them with Baghdad, Shiraz, and parts of Central Asia. During earlier travels to this area, I had visited the town's dargahs (shrines) built around the tombs of revered Sufi saints, and I had photographed several of the family rituals that take place in the open spaces of these dargahs'



Zar Zari Zar Baksh

inner courtyards where men and women pray and offer petitions.

In December of 2002, supported by an ASIANetwork Student-Faculty research grant, I had conducted research in Khuldabad with three Lake Forest College students at the beautiful dargah constructed around the tomb of the saint known as Zar Zari Zar Baksh (the giver of the essence of gold). At that time, our research focused on the powerful singing ritual, the qawwali, performed by men but open to all members of the community and intended to evoke an experience of the divine. The music recorded in 2003 and the images of this dargah can be found at: <http://www.lib.lfc.edu/collections/benton/data/research/Ellora/pages/muslim.html>

Six years later, the focus of my research was to learn from the women of Khuldabad how they conceptualized the decades old religious rituals they performed at these saints' shrines. However, by January 2009, I found the women were not so sure about praying in the dargahs. Muslim teachers from outside Khuldabad were preaching that dargah rituals were un-Islamic. And while many women still hoped for help from the saints they had prayed to for generations, their visits to the dargahs had become less frequent. Women carefully explained to me that they went to the dargahs now only to enjoy the grounds, not to petition the saints. Dargahs were becoming off-limits to women preserving their status as good Muslims.

In Khuldabad, the dargahs had always been one of the few public spaces where Muslim women could visit, picnic, pray, and enjoy rituals. But views are changing and women who like to pray at the dargahs court conflict with husbands, siblings, in-laws, and neighbors who argue vociferously that seeking the blessing or intercession of a saint is not Muslim practice at all. Indeed, some believe that praying at a dargah is a violation of the core Islamic belief in absolute monotheism. Prayers should be offered directly to God, not to intermediaries such as saints or prophets. Women drawn to the centuries old custom of turning to the saints for help and protection now find themselves caught in a swirl of opposing perspectives. Not willing to give up completely the peacefulness of the dargahs, these women are also not prepared to argue with those trying to make them purer Muslims. One woman in her mid-fifties said she was too old to start covering her face or worrying about whether some of her hair was visible when she left her house. Still, not wanting conflict, she simply finds ways to avoid the men always ready to preach to her.

Khuldabad, molded by the rituals and festivals celebrated at the shrines of the Sufi saints who lived there, is now a town of opposing Islamic worldviews: the worldviews represented by the history, rituals, and perspectives of the dargah culture and the worldviews of Muslim organizations identified with more conservative interpretations of Islamic scripture and history. In

the streets of Khuldabad, almost every woman wears full burqa and niqab, allowing only her eyes to be seen by those she meets. Fewer and fewer women feel comfortable walking into the shrines of the saints who founded Khuldabad and remained the core of its identity for 700 years.

Khuldabad's Dargahs: Being Blessed by the Saints

Khuldabad was established in the fourteenth century by disciples of a famous Chishti Sufi teacher who lived in Delhi, Nizam al-Din Awliya.² Among these disciples was the highly-respected teacher, Burhan al-Din Gharib, who brought elite Sufi practices to the Deccan, including the sama' ritual of listening to qawwali music in an attitude of prayer and with the desire to reach the Divine. Revered as a saint, Burhan al-Din Gharib is buried in the heart of Khuldabad behind large shrine walls that surround a courtyard within a courtyard that holds the saint's tomb, a mosque area, cemetery, and an expansive outer courtyard with a cooking alcove containing the large cauldrons used to prepare food for thousands of pilgrims on festival days.

Directly across from the Burhan al-Din shrine is another shrine complex constructed around the tomb of his successor, Zayn al-Din Shirazi, and the tombs of several other Chishti saints. Just inside this complex is the simple tomb of the last Mughal emperor of India, Aurangzeb, understood to have repented his life of warfare and bloodshed as he neared death, choosing to be buried in the company of these revered Sufi saints rather than as a king like his father, Shah Jahan, whose tomb is enshrined in the Taj Mahal.

Although tombs of holy people are scattered throughout the Khuldabad area, the town's largest and most beautiful shrine preserves the tombs of Burhan al-Din's mother, Bibi Hajira, and his brother, Muntajib al-Din known more familiarly by his epithet, Zar Zari Zar Baksh, giver of gold. The Zar Zari Zar Baksh Dargah, located at the edge of town at the foot of a rocky desolate hill, has traditionally attracted the largest numbers of pilgrims throughout the year, as the saint and his mother are understood to be powerful mediators. People travel long

distances to petition the saints' help with such matters as conceiving a healthy child or finding a spouse.

In 2003, I photographed family groups at the Zar Zari Zar Baksh Dargah celebrating children who looked to be 10 months to 2 years old. Families who have given birth to healthy children after petitioning the saints, routinely return to the shrine to perform a thanksgiving ritual in which the family offers the weight of the child in sweetbreads to the dargah community, and then enjoys a picnic in the outer courtyard of the shrine. During this visit, I also photographed a group of high school students on a class field trip from Aurangabad, a large industrial city about 35 kilometers away. Both boys and girls had great fun posing for my photos, the girls quickly arranging their scarves (dupattas) over some part of their heads or shoulders. Especially on Thursdays and Fridays at the dargah, I encountered groups of women, Hindu and Muslim, sometimes with spouses but often not, unwrapping picnic baskets and watching the children play in the of the dargah courtyard.

All who travel to the dargah are understood to be blessed by being in the presence of the physical remains of the saint. Although women are not allowed to touch the tomb, male shrine workers brush the tomb with peacock feather bundles and then touch these bundles to the head and shoulders of the women to convey the saint's blessing physically. Some women make offerings of cloth or flowers at the tomb, receiving small sugar balls in return. Others tie bangles over the Bibi Hajira doorway as symbols of their petitions.

Five years later, in 2008, I returned to the Zar Zari Zar Baksh Dargah and learned that most of the women visitors to the dargah were no longer from Khuldabad, but from towns farther away. A woman I had talked with extensively in 2003 told me that men from the Tablighi Jamaat and Ahle Hadith were pushing people to reject the dargahs, preaching that petitioning the saints at the dargahs was forbidden by Islam. Tablighi preachers teach that Muslims should pray only to God, she said, not to the saints or prophets, even as intermediaries. Praying at the shrine of a saint is idolatry (*shirk*), the worst sin

in Islam.³ According to these preachers, devotion to saints and their shrines was a practice brought by illiterate Mughals ignorant of the true teachings of the *Qur'an* and hadiths.⁴ Thus, the petitioning of a saint was worse than useless; it was sinful.

Still, many of the residents of Khuldabad were not persuaded by this perspective, and certainly my friend was not. She said these men were arrogant and pushy, always telling her to cover more of her body and to give up the dargah. She had studied the *Qur'an* herself and did not agree with their teachings. Her husband had worked at the dargahs for many years as a musician and maker of musical instruments, and much of her life had been spent at dargahs in Khuldabad and Mumbai where she had grown up. She loved the dargahs and continued to visit them even after the death of her husband two years earlier. At the same time, she recognized that things were changing in Khuldabad, as more people had begun listening to the forceful teachers of the Tablighi Jamaat and Ahle-Hadith, the two Muslim missionary organizations whose preaching challenged the traditions of the dargahs.

The Ahle Hadith (People of Hadith⁵), founded in India in the nineteenth century, advocates a theology based on literal adherence to the *Qur'an* and hadiths, and a mission to purify Islam of superstitions and idolatries. Ahle Hadith teaches that invoking any prophet (including Muhammad) or saint in prayer, visiting the tombs of saints or prophets, or the celebration of saints' feasts, is a polytheistic practice, deeply heretical in light of Islam's foundational teaching of the oneness of God. Consistent with their goal of purifying the practice of Islam, Ahle Hadith ban photographs, tobacco, and any celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, a popular custom in many Islamic cultures.

Although the Ahle Hadith has a small presence in Khuldabad, especially through those husbands and brothers doing contract work in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, the larger influence appears to be that of the Tablighi Jamaat. Many townspeople know the fundamental teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat and their Saturday classes. Not only are women more fully covered

with burqa and niqab, some men in Khuldabad have begun wearing the beards and white kurta pajamas advocated by the Tablighi Jamaat.⁶ Reformers and missionaries, Tablighi Jamaat preachers travel widely as part of their religious mandate to teach brother and sister Muslims their view of authentic Islamic practice, and they now have a strong base of followers in the Khuldabad-Aurangabad area.

Tablighi Jamaat Origins: 20th Century Reform and Missionary Zeal

The Tablighi Jamaat was founded in north India in the 1920s to spread the teachings of a prominent Islamic seminary in Deoband, and to provide a counterweight to twentieth century Hindu shuddhi (purifying) campaigns. These campaigns had been organized to convert or possibly “reconvert” Muslim villagers before they were counted in the British census being used to determine Hindu and Muslim representative seats in the British colony’s legislative body.⁷ The British had decided to establish a representative legislative assembly based on religious identities. But this question was complicated in India where villagers often participated in the religious festivals and rituals of several religious traditions. Religious practice in South Asia did not have the same kind of rigid boundaries as in England where Anglicans would not worship with Roman Catholics or Jews. In South Asia, while people strongly identified with their birth-communities, their jatis, they often participated in whatever religious rituals were thought to bring blessing, a practice that caused confusion for the British trying to establish clear categories for their census. Several Hindu groups saw in this situation an opportunity to convince villagers that they had been Hindu before the Moguls had arrived in India, and thus could be Hindu again. As communities of Muslim villagers were “purified” and returned to their former Hindu identities, the Hindu share of assembly seats began to increase.

When members of the Islamic Deobandi seminary recognized that groups of illiterate Muslim villagers were being lost to Islam, they realized their responsibility as Muslims and

clerics to teach authentic Islam in the villages, even though such travel posed a great change in lifestyle for these learned scholars accustomed to the status and amenities of city life. Focused on teaching authentic Islamic practice and belief to village Muslims, the Tablighi Jamaat (people devoted to preaching) was established.

In the eight decades since their founding, the Tablighi Jamaat have grown into a worldwide network, deeply rooted in the Muslim populations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and in the diaspora South Asian Muslim communities of the UK, Australia, Europe, and North America. Tablighi missionaries have also established strong presences in Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Africa. Each year, thousands of Tablighi missionaries come together in India (Bhopal), Pakistan (Raiwind), and Bangladesh (Tongi) for annual gatherings, called Ijtema. In January 2009, the Bangladesh Ijtema drew 3 million Tablighi participants, a gathering of Muslims said to be second in size only to the Hajj in Mecca.⁸

The Ijtema offers Tablighi missionaries spiritual renewal and learning, as they attend lectures focused on foundational teachings. These formative teachings are summarized in their six principles (*chhe baten*)⁹:

1. Exclusive belief in one God and his Prophet, i.e. reciting the shahada (confession of faith) correctly in Arabic.
2. Prayer five times a day, saying and performing namaz (prayer) correctly, including ritual ablutions.
3. Knowledge and remembrance of God, i.e. learning basic obligatory rituals such as fasting, zakat (almsgiving), and meditating on God, in addition to reciting the *Qur'an* and reading hadith (words of the Prophet Muhammad).
4. Treating others with honor and respect, especially elders and scholars of Islam ('ulama).
5. Performing all actions for God to win divine recompense rather than worldly or material rewards.

6. Sparing time to preach, following the example of the Prophet. Tablighs are strongly encouraged to spend defined periods of time traveling to spread the pure form of Islam.

Guided by these principles, Tablighi men (though women are allowed to travel, in practice, the itinerant preachers in India are primarily men) reach out to other Muslims preaching pure Islam as they understand it to have been practiced by the Prophet Muhammad.

The Tablighi Jamaat, like other religious communities rooted in divine revelation, must decide which interpretation of the divine revelation—fixed in the *Qur'an*—most accurately represents God's meaning. For the Tablighi Jamaat, this interpretative authority rests in their founder, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas and his successors, who follow what they describe as a Deobandi interpretation of Hanafi jurisprudence.¹⁰

Tablighi Jamaat in Khuldabad: 21st Century Changes for Women

How has the missionary work of the Tablighi Jamaat among Maharashtra Muslims affected the women of Khuldabad? In 1993, I saw Khuldabad for the first time through the windows of a bus traveling to the Ajanta Caves, the site of 2000 year old rock-cut Buddhist caves about 100 kilometers away. I noted the minarets of mosques towering from behind high walls and the many scattered Muslim tombs in fields along the road, testifying to the Muslim history and identity of this area. In the town center, women in black or brown burqas (long robes worn over their clothes) shopped or walked with children, their faces clearly visible as they went about their daily activities beneath shop signs in Urdu and English.

When I returned to Khuldabad in 2001 and 2003, there were indications of change. During the previous decade of intensifying Hindu-Muslim tension, in India generally and in Maharashtra specifically, the conservative Hindu Shiv Sena had constructed a bright orange Maruti Temple devoted to the Hindu

monkey god in the middle of this ninety-nine percent Muslim town, demonstrating the growing political power of this strongly pro-Hindu organization and pushing Muslims to interact only with other Muslims. Also, fewer women appeared to be shopping in the center of town, though the dargah was still filled with women, particularly on Thursdays and Fridays.

By 2009, changes among the women were undeniable. Outside the home, almost every woman in Khuldabad now wears full burqa with niqab (face-covering). Older women and women on the lower rungs of the social and economic ladder still might wear only the loose black robe, or burqa, with a simple head covering in public. But younger women, especially those who are educated, of marriageable age, or married to men working in Saudi Arabia or Dubai, are always fully covered, allowing only their eyes to be seen in the street. All schoolgirls at the Maulana Azad Government School (elementary and high school age) now wear some form of head covering though with faces open. Even a few four-year-old girls are wearing small gray or white burqas and head coverings (with faces open), though most girls under the age of seven or eight still wear the typical bright colored dresses with no burqa or head and shoulder covering.

In 2009, when I asked the women about their reasons for wearing the burqa and niqab, I heard that

- the burqa is mandated for women by the *Qur'an*
- the *Qur'an* says in Surah 33 that women must observe purdah of the cloth and men must observe purdah of the eyes (i.e. averting their eyes)
- women should follow the behavior of the Prophet's wives who were veiled
- only sinful or ignorant women deserving of no respect would appear in public uncovered
- one of the hadiths reports that the body of a woman who is not fully covered in her life will be burned by Allah when she dies
- a female physician explained that the Prophet knew the

health-giving properties of the burqa/niqab in protecting the wearer from lung pollutants and bronchial infections 1400 years ago. In addition to lungs, the burqa also protects the wearer's ears, eyes, skin, and throat.

These women knew with absolute certainty that wearing the burqa/niqab was the purest way to live as a Muslim woman, as it had been mandated in clear terms by God and recorded in the *Qur'an*. When asked how they had learned the *Qur'an* and hadiths, the women explained that Tablighi Jamaat classes, held most Saturdays at a location nearby, and lectures broadcast on the Peace TV television channel offered learned interpretations of the *Qur'an* and lessons on proper Muslim conduct. A woman in the group explained that if one woman went to the Tablighi classes and learned something new, she would bring it back for all of them to learn.

Although most of the women I interviewed liked the Tablighi *Qur'an* classes, most also said they tended to ignore the men when they began instructing them on proper behavior for women. When I asked what annoyed them in these lectures on being a good Muslim woman, they simply looked disgusted and said they had no time for "all that."

In terms of general attitudes toward the Tablighi Jamaat, the women I interviewed reflected a spectrum of responses. Some appreciated the sureness of knowing they were following the word of God and the example of the Prophet's wives, while others voiced more nuanced views. Strong agreement with Tablighi teachings was most pronounced among educated women in their twenties and thirties (secondary school, bachelors, or masters degrees), while women in their forties, fifties, and sixties, along with women in lower social and economic positions, were more ambivalent. For example, while all the women agreed with the Tablighi teaching that women belong in the home rather than the workplace, older women and those socially disadvantaged were less like to follow that directive in their own lives. Staying out of the workplace is a

luxury available only to women with income-earning and committed husbands. Other women must work outside the home for their own survival and that of their families. In Khuldabad, widows with no children and little education routinely collect alms at the dargah to survive, and young women from families with little money drop out of school to stitch clothes, work at food stalls, or do other semi-skilled or unskilled work. One woman widowed at a young age raised eight children by taking over her husband's flower business. This woman, quite proud of her successful business selling flowers at the dargah, has no patience for what she described as the arrogance and hypocrisy of the Tablighi preachers who come to the dargah to scowl at people, while privately making their own donations to the shrine.

In fact, the Tablighi Jamaat appears to hold a contradictory stance regarding women and work. While formal Tablighi teaching urges women to stay out of the workplace, among Tablighi supporters, there is great respect for women working as teachers, college professors, physicians, pharmacists, and computer engineers. The reason articulated within Tablighi circles for supporting female education is that educated women will be better Muslim mothers. But these same Tablighi circles voice respect for the status of professional women, women who obviously work outside the home. The contradictory message conveyed by supporting advanced female education while discouraging women from practicing their professional skills was said not to be a problem for the women I met. But the tension posed by these contradictory directives was apparent in the words they used to describe their work choices.

Two highly educated women, both with Masters' degrees and secure finances, said they had chosen not to work in order to more closely follow the example of the Prophet's wives. One of these women had, earlier, been an elementary school teacher but left that job when she learned it was improper for her to work outside the home. Another woman, currently teaching at an elementary school, expressed disappointment with herself that she was working and not living the purer life

modeled by the Prophet's wives who remained inside their homes.¹¹

These women are caught between the influences of education and modernization pulling them toward professional education and careers, and the Tablighi teachings pushing them to practice female Islamic purity by staying out of the workplace.

Dargah as Communal Center and Mosque

Dargahs, especially for women, have existed in Khuldabad as centers of Muslim life. In contrast to mosques in India, most of which have long forbidden women, dargahs have welcomed women, offering large courtyards where children can run, women can socialize, and older people can spend leisure time. Prominent dargahs host annual festivals commemorating the death anniversaries (urs) of the saints and draw crowds of thousands. Many of the women I interviewed talked about the annual festivals as times to enjoy music, food, shopping, and visiting. Although the singers of qawwali and their musicians are traditionally men, women enjoy these performances both as religious experience and entertainment.

In addition to being communal centers, dargahs also function as mosques. Indeed, all large dargahs contain an internal courtyard with a platform area designed to be used as a mosque.¹² At prayer times, men in the dargah and men from the local area gather in this mosque area, while women in the courtyard continue their activities, sitting in front of the tomb, talking with friends, praying off to the side. Inside the walls of the dargah, the men's prayer time is simply another activity near the saint's tomb and women continue to come and go.

The openness of the dargah's architecture and rituals seamlessly blends the presence of women into the male prayer space, without overtly challenging the custom of separating men and women for prayer. And in this subtle blending of women and men in the inner courtyard area, the dargahs reflect a view of women that differs sharply from that of most South Asian mosques, where prayer spaces are completely closed to women.



Woman in burqa at prayer time in dargah

One day, I happened into the quieter dargah of Burhan al-Din Gharib just before midday prayer. Out of respect for the prayer time, I sat on a small stone bench a few yards from the saint's tomb and the rows of praying men. After a few minutes, I noticed a woman had sat down near me, fully covered in burqa/niqab. She sat perfectly still through the prayer and left when it was over. Though I did not talk with her, I wondered whether she had walked into the dargah expressly for the noon prayer, knowing this was a place for prayer where she would be accepted.¹³

In Khuldabad, Sufi dargahs have functioned as centers of religious and social life for both women and men. But while men had, and continue to have, many options for socializing outside the family compound, respectable women had only the dargah. Still, women strongly committed to Tablighi teachings explained to me, in unequivocal terms, that men and women should never mix in public, and certainly not in dargahs or mosques where women might distract men from prayer, causing them to sin. Women, they continued, should pray only in the closed quarters of their homes.

Determining Authentic Islam Sparks Family Conflict

While her husband continues to work in the Gulf, Muna and her three children live in her family's courtyard home with her parents and her brother and his family. Strongly professing the principles of the Tablighi Jamaat, Muna, her husband, and brother have tried to teach her parents and younger sister (who lives close by with her husband and three children) to leave the dargah culture, but so far, they have not been successful. Still, the members of this close extended family appear to get along well, in spite of their opposing views of what it means to be a good Muslim. Her sister talks openly of going to the dargah for rituals and lets her head scarf fall around her shoulders in conversation, while Muna's head covering stays tightly wrapped around her face, even at home.

Other women describe opposing views of the dargah rituals as a source of deep family conflict. One of the most popular of these rituals is called "the Bismillah" and entails a blessing at the dargah for children at the age of 4 years/4 months/4 days before their first day of school. With this blessing and the protection of the saint, the child is safely launched into the outside world, the world outside the family. This ritual has been performed for generations and confers a sense of security as the child is placed in the care of God and the saint. But when asked about this ritual, many women expressed uncertainty and internal conflict. Although the Tablighi teachings make it very clear that this is a practice contrary to Islam, these mothers want to protect their children. One woman said that her husband had forbidden her to perform the Bismillah at the dargah, but he said they could perform the ritual for their son at home. Another woman said she had taken her older children to the dargah for the Bismillah, but, to keep peace with her in-laws, was considering not taking her youngest child. A third woman, commenting on this issue from the Tablighi perspective, said that she and her husband were at odds with her in-laws who, in this case, wanted the parents to do the Bismillah for their child. When she and her husband refused, things got so bad they had to find another place to live.

These complex family dynamics are often intensified when sons, brothers, and husbands return from multi-year contracts in the Persian Gulf or Saudi Arabia where they learn narrower interpretations of Islam. While their husbands are abroad, women and their children often live with her parents and siblings, who typically continue the traditional rituals. But when the men return to Khuldabad, often for short durations of a few weeks or months, the wives learn that their husbands no longer accept the dargah traditions of their parents and grandparents. Problematically for some, they expect their wives also to conform to their newly formed ideas of Muslim purity. One woman told me her husband demanded that she wear not only the full burqa and niqab, but also long black gloves and stockings to cover her hands, wrists, and feet. Although she thought such dress was ridiculous, she said her husband supported her well and she could manage for the few weeks out of every three years that he returned to Khuldabad. Among the twenty-nine women I interviewed, this woman was the only woman who asked specifically not to be photographed, as her husband was a strong follower of Ahle Hadith, who advocate practices that include the proscription of all photography. He had explained that photographs for enjoyment are prohibited. And she would follow her husband's wishes.

Although she wore burqa and niqab, this woman was also the only person who directly questioned the teaching that women should wear the burqa as a way to protect men from sinning. Men, she said, can see through the burqa fabric if they choose. Though she believed that women should follow the purdah of dress (veiling) for the sake of modesty, she said that it was just as important for men to observe purdah of the eyes. As she spoke in a small group of six to seven women, the other women listened intently. Though no one actively agreed with her, no one disagreed either.

Indeed, all the women I interviewed expressed complete agreement on two issues impacting the purity of women: (1) women should be covered (i.e. burqa and niqab) in public, and (2) women should never enter a mosque. As prescribed by the

Qur'an and hadiths, and by the example of the Prophet's wives, women must be fully covered in public and women should never pray in mosques. When I mentioned that women in Muslim countries like Turkey did pray in mosques in separate areas designated for them, they were horrified and said those women could not be good Muslims.

Conclusions and Further Research

The twenty-first century is clearly a time of transition for the Muslim women of Khuldabad. It is difficult to say what will happen to the dargah culture as the teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat continue to reach Khuldabad via television, internet, and classes. Although the Tablighi message is that the dargah traditions were initiated by illiterates with a wrong understanding of true Islamic faith and practice, in fact, the Chishti Sufi tradition was brought to the Deccan by highly educated men versed in Arabic and Persian commentaries on Islamic law and theology, in addition to the esoteric teachings of the Sufi tradition. These men worked primarily among elite, educated Muslims, who wanted to learn contemplative Sufi practice and study¹⁴, though a few Sufi rituals were taught to the broader community, most prominently, the popular qawwali performing and listening rituals. But as the generations passed, fewer master Sufi teachers resided in Khuldabad and the care of the dargahs passed through generations of shrine families, some receiving stipends from wealthy patrons and some supported by donations to the dargah. I asked about the possibility of meeting Sufi teachers and saints today, but even the oldest people had never met such a holy person. There are still a few highly trained, qawwali musicians who perform at the Khuldabad dargahs, as well as at other dargahs in the larger Muslim communities in the Deccan where *urs* festivals are sponsored with great fanfare and celebration. But, for the most part, the dargahs survive as they have for most of the last few hundred years, as beautiful places, some maintained better than others, where ordinary people can connect to the divine.

In South Asia, the fierce debates continue between the supporters of the shrines¹⁵ and their opponents, primarily the Tablighi Jamaat and Ahle Hadith in India, over what constitutes authentic Islamic practice. But as these debates have boiled and simmered and boiled in Islamic circles for more than 1200 years, most likely they will continue. The physical survival of the dargahs in Khuldabad, however, may be determined not by these debates, but, more prosaically, by whether they continue to receive the funds necessary to maintain the roofs and walls and gardens that give form to these sacred spaces.

Caught in the active discussions of how to live as a pure Muslim woman in the twenty-first century, the women of Khuldabad must determine their own beliefs and practices. Though the continued influence of the Tablighi Jamaat and Ahle Hadith are hard to predict, these movements currently appear to have strong followings in this area. A large residential boys school teaching a conservative Islamic curriculum, Al-Irfan, has been built at the far edge of town, with money said to be from the Gulf,¹⁶ though girls still attend the government school. Committed teachers at the government school bemoan the



Girls at Maulana School

school's lack of resources and the high dropout rate for girls, mostly between the ages of ten and fifteen, to work and marry. The choices for most of the girls are quite limited, given the restrictions of poverty and poor literacy. As these girls take up the responsibilities of womanhood, what Islamic worldviews will shape their thinking? Will those girls with the family resources and support to pursue higher levels of education ultimately choose to take up careers as physicians and computer engineers working alongside men?

My hope is to return to Khuldabad to continue my conversations with the women living between the dargahs and the Tablighi Jamaat. I would like to talk to high school and college age girls about their perceptions and aspirations as they prepare for their responsibilities as adult Muslim women. In addition to being influenced by their teachers, parents, and the social movements around them, the more affluent young women may also be exposed to the range of ideas flowing through the ever-increasing number of Muslim blogs and discussion sites on the web.

Khuldabad, like much of the rest of the world, is beginning to sample the array of perspectives available via youtube, blue tooth, and Google. During my first afternoon in Khuldabad, one woman offered to give me a five-minute video of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina that her brother-in-law had taken with his cellphone camera when he was on Hajj. When I asked how she could "give it" to me, she asked me rather incredulously, "Don't you have a cellphone?" Still not getting it, I offered her my friend's cellphone, which she immediately placed on the floor for the transferal of the video—via bluetooth. As I stared at the two cellphones on the earthen floor, transferring video bits-and-bytes, bluetooth icons blinking, she enjoyed seeing my naïve surprise. And indeed, there is something amazing to me still about this video of the holy city of the Prophet that now sits on my laptop.

But this episode evokes a larger question, how technology is shaping the lives of the women in Khuldabad, these woman striving to be good students and good teachers, good mothers and good wives, good friends—and good Muslims. Will the

teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat and other Islamic reform movements, broadcast through the internet and lecture videos transferred through cellphones, persuade women that purdah is the only way for them to cultivate inner purity? Or will technology, by offering access to the views of Muslims around the globe, introduce the women of Khuldabad to other possibilities and paradigms for living in purity, and in the world, as a Muslim woman?

Sources

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Endnotes

- ¹To protect the identities of the women, I have used only fictitious names in this paper.
- ²For a full discussion of the Chishti origins of Khuldabad, see the extensive work by Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics in a South Asian Sufi Center*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992.
- ³Yoginder Sikand, *Origins and Development of the Tablighi-Jama'at, (1920-2000)*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002. p. 90-94.
- ⁴Conversation with an educated woman, with an M.A. in English Literature, who is a vociferous proponent of Tablighi teachings, January 2009.
- ⁵hadith: saying of the Prophet Muhammad. Hadith collections are an authoritative source of teaching in Islam.
- ⁶<http://www.sunniforum.com/forumshowthread.php?t=45832&highlight=tablighi> The sunniforum.com site responds to questions posed by Muslims trying to adhere to Tablighi teachings. This response, dated 12 May 2009, explains the legal basis for Tablighi practices in the Hanafi school of shariah law. These practices are wearing the niqab (face veil), fist-length beard, and trousers above the ankle.
- ⁷Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi-Jama'at (1920-2000)*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002. pp. 24-66.
- ⁸*Kuwait Times*, January 26, 2009 http://www.kuwaittimes.net/read_news.php?newsid=NTAwMTAzMzUy

- ⁹ Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi-Jama'at (1920-2000)*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002. pp. 71-72.
- ¹⁰ Mohammad Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007. p..135.
- ¹¹ This view of the Prophet's wives is taught by the Tablighi Jamaat, but is not supported by historical documentation. According to historians, several of the Prophet's wives took leadership positions in the early Islamic community, most famously, his wife Aisha who led troops into battle.
- ¹² The literal meaning of mosque (or *masjid* in Urdu) is a place of prostration which describes the nature of Islamic prayer.
- ¹³ In the teaching of some Sufi saints, traveling to the dargah for prayer can even be the equivalent to performing the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. So women unable to make the Hajj can fulfill this important Islamic duty by travelling to the dargah and offering prayers. However, it is not clear whether this teaching was popular among the Khuldabad Sufis.
- ¹⁴ Carl Ernst, *The Eternal Garden*, pp. 155-165.
- ¹⁵ The most prominent of the groups defending the bonafide Islamic nature of the shrines are called Barelwis, but other Sufi groups are also part of this debate.
- ¹⁶ Though I could get no information about what Islamic organization runs the school or even the age range of the boys, I did meet the wife of an Al-Irfan teacher who was one of the most articulate and strongest proponents of Tablighi teachings I encountered.