

MUSLIMS
FEMINISM

tions. Well versed in both theology and law, STEPS members have also taken to the streets when the petitions haven't been enough, forcing the removal of corrupt policemen and the arrest of violent wife-beaters.

Muslim feminism in south India seems to have come into its own in the last generation, and the story behind its success involves a complex mix of ground realities that reinforce each other. In Andhra Pradesh, the new breed of Muslim women activists draw their inspiration from an earlier generation of feminists. Ayesha Mahmood Farooqui, who teaches Islamic Studies at Osmania University, says, "Hyderabad's educated young women have examples like Jeelani Bano, the president of the Asmita Resource Centre for Women. She is a feminist first and foremost, but just happens to be a Muslim as well. People like her are role models that these young women look up to. When a new generation comes up that is more conscious of its Muslim identity, it is forced to shape itself in an already existing feminist mould."

Even organisations such as the Tablighi Jamaat and Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, considered bastions of conservatism, have very active women's wings in south India. Jamaat-e-Islami vice president Siddiq Hassan says, "We have women's wings all over India, but it is only in south India that women are so active and socially aware. Higher literacy and global influences are the reasons for it."

In neighbouring Tamil Nadu, it is history, geographical location and social conditions that favoured the development of an Islam that allows for strong women activists. Set in the middle of the vast sea trade route, Islam was brought to Tamil Nadu by merchants and entrepreneurs, with a mindset far removed from the feudal mentality of their north Indian cousins. Tamil Muslims look east as well as west along the sea route. "There are strong Tamil Muslim communities across Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia," explains historian and activist V. Geetha. These are countries with strong women leaders, and globalisation forges links bet-

Daud Sharifa Khanam in the STEPS office



VOICES OF REASON

Muslim women in south India have been remarkably successful in fighting for their rights

They are active in issues such as dowry harassment, spousal abuse, employment opportunities, property rights* entry to mosques

Better education, literacy levels than in the north helped them achieve their goals

So has Islamic tradition In the south, influenced by sea-faring merchants, which has a more open mindset

ween them and Indian Muslims. "Not only that," she adds, "Tamil Nadu is a land of dargahs where women are always heavily represented, so activist networks are easily built up."

Apart from an excellent educational system and high literacy levels, globalisation has had a significant influence in Kerala as well. Young Malayalis working in the Gulf have come back with a feminist idea that prevails in the otherwise conservative Arab world—most Arab mosques allow women to pray within their precincts, and this issue has become a rallying point for Kerala's Muslim women, with which they can put the hidebound clergy in place, as Khadija has just done in the Noor Masjid case.

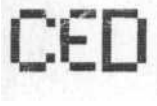
The rise of new Muslim feminist mov-

ements in south India has also been triggered by communal politics. In Hyderabad, the Confederation of Voluntary Organisations (COVA) was founded in the aftermath of communal riots. "We activists first went into the old city in 1991, and then again in 1992, to provide relief after riots," says Asiya Khatoon, director of the Manila Sanatkar team at COVA. "The women asked us to provide something beyond relief. They needed jobs, education and help against exploitative in-laws." COVA found that 85 per cent of girls would drop out of school after the first few years. They were first sent to vocational learning centres just to keep them safe during riots, but they then educated themselves and picked up valuable vocational skills. In March 2002, as Gujarat burned, COVA organised a series of human chains with burqa-clad women standing hand-in-hand with their Hindu and Sikh sisters to prevent communal violence.

The path towards self-sufficiency has not been easy, nor is it complete. Old-style politicians are feared as the stumbling blocks. "The politicians get their votes from the male-dominated jamaats, the same that never deliver for women. When we get the administration to respond, the politicians feel increasingly irrelevant and threatened," says Sharifa Khanam. The president of the Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam, M.H. Jawaharullah, has called Khanam's women's jamaat "a fringe group surviving on media hype". The women's mosque that Khanam started building in 2004 has only advanced to the foundation stage, and its completion seems far away. But, typically, she and other STEPS members are undaunted.

The self-confidence engendered by this generation of activists has changed the way south Indian Muslim women look at their situation. Asiya Khatoon says, "The first thing that women in the old city now ask from somebody with a political agenda is to get lost. They are self-sufficient now, and have had enough of being used as political pawns."

with Pushpa Iyengar in Chennai and John Mary in Thiruvananthapuram



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