

RESISTING FUNDAMENTALISM



FEMINIST RESPONSES
FROM INDIA
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American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is the leading Jewish organization working to promote human rights and end poverty in the developing world. AJWS advances the rights of women, girls and LGBTI people; promotes recovery from conflict, disasters and oppression; and defends access to food, land and livelihoods. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia and the Americas and by mobilizing our community in the U.S. to advocate for global justice. Working together, we strive to build a more just and equitable world.



BACKGROUND

Religious Fundamentalism in India

It is an oft-repeated joke that whatever you say about India, the opposite also holds true. India's famous paradoxes include a striking rate of economic growth, despite dismal indicators of human development. The country is home to both a rising "millionaires club" and more than 300 million people still living in extreme poverty.

There is also a contrast between the declaration of equality of all religions¹ in the Indian Constitution and the inequalities between communities that exist in practice. This problem was highlighted by the Sachar Committee,² set up in 2005 to look into the socioeconomic development of Muslims in India. The Committee's controversial report revealed that, despite the promises of equality in the eyes of the state, the Muslim population in India had remained neglected and continued to live in poverty, with no access to basic necessities, infrastructure, education, credit, health, employment and justice.

In the last three decades, violence born of this social inequality has worsened. There has been a spate of riots between different religious groups and horrific acts of violence within and among these communities. These incidents have led to increased assertion of religious identities and the politicization of religion.³ Hindu right-wing groups have become socially and politically powerful, mobilizing youth in different states to join their cadres. Similarly, there has been a surge in South Asian Muslim religious groups and mobilization of youth. Additionally, international stereotyping of Muslims as "terrorists" has made an impact in India, which has repeatedly been a target of terror attacks. As a result, the state has taken measures in the name of anti-terrorism that often violate the civil and political rights of Muslim citizens.

Fundamentalism and Women's Rights: A Feminist Perspective

The inequalities and violence experienced by India's Muslim community have had an especially detrimental effect on Muslim women. They are deprived of basic rights on account of their religion and gender, but they also face other compounded problems: They experience domestic violence, desertion and abandonment by their husbands, have an elevated school drop-out rate and represent a low- or un-paid labor force, as most work in their homes or in the informal sector. These abuses and inequalities are often justified by communities using Muslim personal law, which includes civil laws on marriage, divorce, child support, child custody and right to property. When women or women's rights advocates have sought to challenge these laws—like the case of Shah Bano and her claim to alimony in 1985⁴—

the cases have set off controversies and ignited tension between fundamentalist Muslims and feminists, as well as the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority.

However, even the Sachar Committee Report failed to mention women or acknowledge the discrimination against Muslim women by both the state and their own communities.⁵ All of the developments that the report documents—communal violence, the rise of right-wing groups, anti-terrorist measures and the politicization of religion—have affected women differently from men. Past cases have shown that, in their attempt to seek social and political power, religious fundamentalist groups use strategies for asserting religious identity that are often acted out on women. They have raped women as a tool of intimidating and humiliating minority communities and imposed strict restrictions on women's behavior.⁶ Moreover, an extensive survey conducted by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) showed that the rise of religious fundamentalism was pushing back efforts of women's rights activists all over the world,⁷ in some cases reversing any recent gains.

GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

This paper attempts to document the impact of religious fundamentalism on women's rights in India using interviews with representatives of five grassroots women's groups from different parts of the country: Awaaz-e-Niswan (AEN), Astitva, Mohammad Bazar Backward Class Development Society (MBBCDS), Shaheen and Sahiyar. These interviews enable us to examine what forms religious fundamentalism takes on in these varied contexts, the ways in which it impacts women's lives and how women's rights activists negotiate and respond to these forces.

Awaaz-e-Niswan (AEN) is a feminist collective based in Mumbai. It offers counselling and legal services to Muslim women in cases of divorce, domestic violence and desertion, in addition to providing trainings and running campaigns focused on women's rights. AEN also runs Rehnuma, a resource centre that provides English and computer classes for girls in a predominantly Muslim area of the city. In the northern city of Muzzafarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, **Astitva** works to empower local Muslim girls through education and livelihood-generating activities and to combat violence against women through campaigns and trainings. **Mohammad Bazar Backward Classes Development Society (MBBCDS)** works in Muslim and tribal communities in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, running schools for girls and programs focused

on economic empowerment of women and gender justice. **Shaheen** works in about 20 slums inhabited by impoverished and marginalized Muslim and Hindu Dalit communities in the Old City in Hyderabad, the capital of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. It intervenes in cases of violence and forced marriages, mobilizes women's collectives and runs workshops and vocational training classes. **Sahiyar**, a feminist collective based in Baroda in the western state of Gujarat, supports women to combat violence and injustice, runs campaigns and works with youth to challenge gender inequality in their communities.

All of these groups are women-led, women-implemented organizations linked to the broader Indian women's movement. All are grantee partners of American Jewish World Service. They also share another important qualification: They work on women's rights issues at the grassroots level, in contexts where fundamentalist forces are a major impediment to their work.

Narrowing Gender Roles and Boundaries Undermine Women's Freedom

On February 21, 2013, two bomb blasts killed 17 people and injured more than 100 in the Old City area of Hyderabad, a densely populated area marked by poverty and lack of basic civic amenities, such as schools or government hospitals. The Old City has been marred by repeated bomb blasts and acts of communal violence in recent years. It stands in stark contrast to HiTech City, the modern part of Hyderabad.

Shaheen works in this part of the city. Its founder, Jameela Nishat, says that the terrorism and violence has had unique implications for women: "It means girls' mobility gets severely restricted." Women are made to stay at home because it's too dangerous to be out. This disrupts their ability to work and go to school.

Often, the first targets of religious fundamentalism are women. Fundamentalists seek to control how they dress, how they move about and what they do—directly curtailing women's access to basic rights, including the rights to mobility, education, self-determination and economic development. In the areas that the women's groups profiled in this paper work in, this control has resulted in pressures for Muslim women to veil, increasingly at younger ages. According to members of AEN, veiling in the Mumbai region has been a relatively recent development: "Muslims along the Konkan coast have never worn *burqa*. But now women do. Various factors led to this. In the 1980s, migrants to the Middle East brought the *burqa* back with them, copying how others practiced. Then, after the 1990s Bombay riots, the rise of stress on Muslim identity manifested. Now, many more women wear the *burqa*."

Religious fundamentalists have also set barriers to women earning a livelihood. This has been a particular problem in the poor neighborhoods that grassroots groups work in, where communities are deprived of infrastructure and basic civic amenities and many women face economic difficulties when their husbands divorce or desert them, leaving them with children to raise and support alone. Despite the need for women to work and earn a living in these contexts, there are rising barriers to girls getting an education or women making a livelihood. Religious leaders issue declarations, or *fatwas*,⁸ that outlaw women's participation in the public sphere, deeming it un-Islamic to work or appear in public.⁹

Rehana Adeeb, founder of Astitva, says, "The fundamentalists' weapon is the *fatwa*. People are not scared of the gun as much as they are of the *fatwa*. It affects a greater volume of people. It positions a woman as an un-Islamist rebel if she goes out and studies. Their strategy is to make the Quran a medium through which they have their say."

AEN members are alarmed at the efficacy of the *fatwa*, even in a cosmopolitan city like Mumbai: "A *fatwa* once declared that women's earnings were *haram* [sinful or immoral according to Islamic religious texts]. We didn't realize how much impact it would have, even amongst educated people. In one case, a woman doctor was asked to leave her job by a prospective groom because of the *fatwa*, and she conceded. If this is the case even in Mumbai, where people are generally more open, we worry about the sort of impact these *fatwas* have in smaller places."

Ayesha Khatun, founder of MBBCDS, says such *fatwas* maintain traditional gender roles: women as caregivers who must remain within the home, and men as breadwinners who work outside the home. In the impoverished area of West Bengal where MBBCDS works, these ideas prevent women from getting educated and becoming self-reliant. Restrictive gender roles are normalized through public *jamaats*,¹⁰ public meetings of men of a particular community where lessons are given on religious duty and the "right way to live." Ayesha says, "We say girls need mobility, need to work, have a livelihood. But religious leaders say what patriarchy says: You are a woman, be in *pardah* [veiled], stay at home. Very young boys pick up all these ideas, and you can see them asserting them on our [female] students."

A new development in Mumbai has been religious education for girls, which has traditionally been the domain of boys. An AEN member says, "Girls are sent for the five-year *aalima* courses in the Arabic religious education tradition. They come back as an *aalima*, which is prestigious and gives her status in the community." While this educational model begins to mold girls into traditional gender roles from an

early age, it does so in the guise of also preparing them for contemporary demands, such as the need for fluency in English, in order to appeal to parents.”

Indian women are also seeing stricter enforcement of gender roles by their families, as parents put extreme pressure on women to get married within stricter boundaries. Rehana from Astitva speaks of the “honor killings” that are common in Muzzafarnagar: “Earlier, women were killed for marrying outside their religion, but now they are killed for marrying outside their caste.”

The fundamentalist vision of women’s gender roles and norms is perpetuated by the Indian government in many of the communities where AJWS’s grantees work. The staff of Sahiyar, in Gujarat, observes that the pro-Hindu, right-wing government in the state has helped to establish women’s roles within strict frameworks of culture and tradition. Sahiyar members cite the example of anti-abortionist propaganda—such as pamphlets dictating that a woman’s role is to bear children or lamenting how pro-choice women are making “tombs of their wombs”—issued by the state and by caste- and sect-based organizations. According to Sahiyar, this propaganda creates “an atmosphere where a woman’s control over her life and her body is reducing.”

Women’s boundaries are thus drawn and re-drawn on ever narrower margins, pushing women back into the home and straitjacketing them into pre-defined gender roles that women’s movements have struggled to break out of for decades.

Fundamentalism Contributes to an Environment of Fear and Intimidation

Many norms (or *dictats*) are imposed on women in fundamentalist communities in India, such as marrying within caste or religious lines, not wearing Western clothes or not using cell phones. In many communities, women who transgress these rules can face dire consequences.

Astitva works in Muzaffarnagar, a part of India that is notorious for having a “wild wild west” mentality that includes rampant gang violence, easy access to guns and illegal but socially accepted informal systems of “law” called *jat panchayats*—religious and caste-based village councils that wield authority over communities. These councils routinely condone “honor killings” of couples who marry for love or who marry across castes or religions. The *panchayats* also order other punishments, including beating, stripping or other public humiliation, for women who challenge their *dictats*.¹¹ Because of the prevalence of weapons in the community, these threats are very real. Rehana says, “From childhood, boys are taught how to handle weapons, which are seen as symbols of bravery.” In this environment, men learn to be violent and women to be fearful.

In addition to the fear women face when religious fundamentalists threaten them for transgressing expected rules and norms of their own religion, there is also an environment of violence perpetuated by conflicts between different religious communities in India. This inter-community violence not only has a particularly restrictive impact on women’s freedoms, but it also puts pressure on the support systems that women have created to address gender based violence. In the Old City of Hyderabad, Shaheen reports that communal violence between Muslims and Hindus burns down bridges that the organization works hard to build between women of different communities. Trust that has taken months to forge—through workshops, meetings, dialogue and tentative friendships—breaks down overnight when reports of alleged violence instill fear and distrust within the women’s networks of support, pitting communities against each other. As Jameela Nishat says, “Girls stop looking into each other’s eyes.”

Divisions in government along religious lines have also polarized communities, further reinforcing prejudices and restricting women by promoting narrow ideas of acceptable women’s roles. The staff of Sahiyar have witnessed what happens when religion and state clash. The Hindu Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) government of Gujarat was implicated in the massacre of Muslims during the Gujarat carnage¹² in 2002 and has remained in office. As a strategy to promote their conservative ideologies, BJP used state mechanisms, like public schools, to popularize songs that were full of Hindu symbolism. Sung in schools during morning assembly, these songs valorized Hindu icons in school curricula, marginalizing Muslim students in public education. The BJP’s ideology of Hindu fundamentalism also promotes narrow gender roles and has been linked to the use of rape of Muslim women to intimidate and humiliate the minority community. The promotion of conservative Hindu ideology through state mechanisms like the school also sends a message to women that their struggle for gender equality will only be respected as long as it doesn’t challenge BJP-supported fundamentalist ideology. Members of Sahiyar say, “For the last 20 years, we have had a [pro-Hindu] right-wing political party in power. They have key persons at all levels and have monopolized public space from highest to lowest level. Their presence is linked with the non-implementation of laws related to women.”

Fundamentalism Turns Religion into Competition, Endangering Women

The last ten years have seen a dramatic increase in the public expression of religiosity of all communities in India. Particularly during festivals, cities present ever-more-prominent decorations and public celebrations. AJWS’s grantees believe that these religious displays are not

simply authentic expressions of faith or pride, but rather of competition and division. Flags and buntings in green or orange have become markers of religious identity that divide a city or a community into ghettos during festivals. Jameela Nishat notes: “Earlier, a [Muslim festival like] *Milad-un-Nabi*¹³ was not so big. Now there are green flags all over the Old City. The expense is paid not by religious leaders, but by petty vendors and shopkeepers who want to show that this religious community is richer than others.” Sahiyar members also observe that “In Baroda, all sorts of identity-based festivals are now celebrated, such as *Hanuman Jayanti* and *Ambedkar Jayanti*, with competing intensity, pomp and fervor.”

Those in the human rights community attribute this change to fundamentalists, who are seeking to assert their identity by demanding that communities give an intense performance of religiosity and a visible display of rituals that were not popular in the past. Both of these are a drain on meager resources—the opportunity cost of which is huge—and promote values of conservatism, extremism and “othering” of different groups.

These festivals use the framework of religiosity to set up a competitive community dynamic that has an element of deepening divides, marking differences and demonstrating power. The traditions of these festivals also broadly promote fundamentalist ideas that fuel conservative notions of women’s roles in society. In this atmosphere, organizing around women’s rights becomes more challenging.

RECLAIMING WOMEN’S RIGHTS: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

According to women’s groups in India, the rise of religious fundamentalism has severely impacted the quality of women’s lives, placing restrictions on their freedom, autonomy and bodies. Working to combat this problem against a backdrop of intimidation and fear hasn’t been easy, but the effect of conservative religious thinking on women’s rights cannot be ignored. Feminists have had to find ways to engage with fundamentalist ideas and organizations, even at their own risk.

The following section describes several approaches that grassroots women’s rights groups have taken to empower women to overcome the boundaries and restrictions placed on them by the rise in fundamentalism in their communities.

Clearing Channels for Dialogue

The primary tool used by AJWS’s grantees to organize around women’s rights is usually dialogue. Dialogue is a vital and enduring strategy for feminist movements, which have

always had to have difficult conversations with men, women, the family and the state. As these groups are committed to surviving within their community context, dialogue becomes an essential strategy to move from polarized positions to open up space to discuss women’s rights, win allies and voice a dissenting position that is not intimidated into silence. But many women’s rights groups have found it difficult to have a dialogue with right-wing groups. Trupti Shah, a founder and member of Sahiyar, says that it is a particular challenge because they “have an ideology which is anti-women, patriarchal, caste-ist, anti-egalitarian.”

Still, women’s groups have attempted to engage in dialogue with religious leaders and institutions at different levels. AEN, for example, sometimes meets local *maulvis*, religious scholars who interpret Islamic law, when following up on divorce and child support cases to make them see the need for including the rights of women in marriage contracts.

Several of AJWS’s grantees have been involved in efforts to bring dialogue about women’s rights into the public sphere. Many of these groups are part of a national network of activists called the Muslim Women’s Rights Network (MWRN), which was formed in 1999. The network has collected stories of affected women to show how practices like unilateral divorce and denial of alimony and child support violated human rights and constitutional rights and sent this evidence to the Personal Law (*Waqf*) Board, an institution that was considering reforms to Muslim personal law. In 2001, women from the MWRN went on stage at a public meeting in front of religious scholars to bear witness to the injustices perpetrated in the name of Muslim personal law. According to AEN members, this was “a big move for Muslim women.” However, the *Waqf* Board washed its hands of responsibility by claiming that it had no power to influence or make any changes to the law. Not willing to give up, AEN and MWRN have also worked on drafting an innovative progressive *nikaahnama* (marriage contract) that upholds women’s rights.

Most efforts at dialogue with right-wing religious leaders occur in reaction to *fatwas* and bans. “We react immediately when provocative comments are made, but not in a conflicting way,” shares Ayesha from MBBCDS. “For example, if a *maulana*¹⁴ publicly says women will go to hell for going out to work, a few days later we have small meetings here and there to talk about this and reiterate that there is no alternative to working for our livelihoods.” In Mumbai, too, AEN stresses the need to respond immediately to taunts and threats and to public cases where personal law rules unjustly in favor of men or when women are being abused, like the Imrana case or Gudia case.¹⁵

The feminist groups agree that what's most important is to create open channels of dialogue with the women in the communities that they support, to give these women an outlet for questioning the extremist ideas being imposed on them and to counter the fundamentalists' critique of the women's groups that keep women from accessing information and support available to them.

For example, MBBCDS has a “*Priyo bandhabhi chithi*” program, similar to a pen pal program, to enable women to reach out to the group privately with questions about rules imposed by the religious leadership, such as veiling, going out of the house, education and triple *talaq*—divorce initiated by men. The strategy was developed because MBBCDS was being demonized by extremists, who alleged that the groups were going to mislead women and the women were shying away from open communication. Ayesha says, “At one point, tension was so great that we thought we can't work anymore. The women in the community were avoiding us, so what to do? So we decided to open up a dialogue.” Through the pen pal program, women send in their questions to MBBCDS. “Sometimes we write back or write a newsletter, sometimes a discussion. Sometimes we invite them to our centre to talk and listen,” Ayesha says.

Members of Shaheen hold small meetings and intimate conversations with women and girls in their community of Old City Hyderabad during times of anxiety after violence, in the hope that this dialogue will prevent an escalation of tensions and provide an outlet for people to express themselves. “You need time and dialogue to sit and talk. Clear minds, and understand that the communal tensions are being fanned by politicians for their selfish benefit,” says Jameela. Sahiyar follows this strategy, too, and held community meetings after recent elections in Gujarat brought the BJP government back to power: “We talked to grassroots women leaders, held small group meetings and distributed leaflets. People say, ‘What you did was really good. It prevented violence.’”

Some of the groups emphasize the importance of reaching out to men and boys, to engage them in productive dialogue about women's rights. Speaking to boys is one of Astitva's favored methods. Rehana says, “Until we spread the message there and engage in dialogue with men, women's rights won't be respected. They are the ones who join the village councils. We have started some workshops with them and found some sensitive boys.”

Trupti, of Sahiyar, also stresses the importance of physically bringing communities together “in some community activity—not just espousing brotherhood rhetoric, but learning things together or from each other.”

Creating Spaces for Women

One of the major barriers to women in fundamentalist communities is the lack of space to come together. Many feminist groups lack space of their own or work in places that are hard for the women they work with to access.

AEN, for example, was founded in 1984 but did not have a space of its own till 1997. Until that time, they worked out of people's homes or used space in other organizations. For a time, it was located in a Hindu neighbourhood, even though its constituents were Muslim. After the riots in Mumbai in 1992, Muslim women reported that it was increasingly difficult to walk to AEN because they faced taunts and harassment for being visibly Muslim. That prompted the organization to start a fund to acquire its own space in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood so that it could set up a resource center for local Muslim women. The centre, which opened in 2003, now runs classes that support women and girls and provides a much-needed space for community discussions.

Rehana, of Astitva, emphasizes the need for a space for Muslim women to come together: “Hindu women have temples and religious gatherings where they meet, but Muslim women don't have such spaces. They just don't come together in a group. To fill this need, we have established the *Islam Roshni Manch Hayaat*, an Islamic reading group where women read the Quran together and do translation and interpretation from a women-centered perspective.” MBBCDS also uses religion to organize women. Once women have been convened in a safe and comfortable environment, MBBCDS uses the group as an opportunity to encourage the women to think critically about Quran-based claims that the male clerics and community leaders often use to suppress women's rights. It also provides girls with arguments that they can use to convince their families that women are not violating the Quran by pursuing things like education, jobs and owning property. Ayesha gives an example: “If you say the Quran says, ‘Man can do this and this, and woman can't,’ and that you are being very righteous in following the Quran, I ask you: What about women's right to paternal property? It is in the Quran, but who does it? So? Then who is going against the Quran?”

Shaheen uses its space to offer girls computer classes and vocational training, to enable them to access modern employment in HiTech Hyderabad. On Wednesdays, the organization hosts a communication class dedicated to talking about other topics, including gender equality, the constitution and stopping violence against women.

All the groups legitimize their space and position in the community by inviting people from different faiths and expertise, as well as political or religious leaders, to come and speak to the women.

Empowering Women to Pursue Education and Economic Opportunities

Women's groups intervene in small ways that they know can have an amplified impact. The computer classes offered by most of these groups, for example, have made many women employable and pushed the boundaries of gendered work, as women are limited in many communities to learning embroidery or henna application. Shaheen offers girls the opportunity to use skills like embroidery to expand their horizons: It exhibits their handiwork in the modern part of Hyderabad and takes members on visits to other states and to meet with other women's groups. It also encourages girls to dream and introduces them to professional role models, so that they can see themselves as doctors, engineers or other professions beyond those dictated by traditional gender roles. AEN runs a program for survivors of gender based violence, called *Zist e Tarashi*, which teaches skills in photography and holds exhibitions of the women's photographs. The program enables Muslim girls and women to take control over how they are represented in media and the public eye, helping to break stereotypes.

Consistent efforts that open options for girls can yield critical results, as Astitva found when it campaigned to have more girls in school by lobbying against corporal punishment in schools and for locally accessible home schools, cleanliness and using the Right to Education guidelines. These efforts resulted in a rise in the number of girls going to school. They also encouraged playing of games in schools. "Why can't girls come out and play? They can learn to make *roti*, yes, but they can also play badminton," says Rehana, "Without saying the teacher is wrong, we would propose things like this."

Getting girls to stay in school is a big problem in most areas, with schools being far away and adolescence seen as a particularly vulnerable time for girls. In Bengal, MBBCDS saw a change in this trend from about 2005 because of their initiative to procure and teach girls to ride bicycles. A staff member says, "No one ever thought this would happen, but 75 out of 100 Muslim girls ride the cycle to school now. 350 girls in Birbhum village, and every one rides a cycle. When they reach class five, they start asking their parents for a cycle." Ayesha is proud that girls are able to make this demand, and also that fathers are motivated to meet the demand. "They are very poor, but education is increasingly important for them. They start planning to buy a cycle for her by rearing a goat, which they can sell for about 1600 rupees with which to buy a cycle," she says of the plan seeded by MBBCDS.

Building Networks

Groups try to influence their environment by working through strong networks that give them safety in numbers

and a broad support base. Ayesha says, "Networking is important, to take people along with us and also to speak through them, as we cannot always be at the forefront because of the threats that exist around us." MBBCDS tries to use the local media to spread their ideas, such as small newspapers and local cable. They ally with positive people, such as retired teachers and *maulanas* who want girls to get higher education. They also use the help of other national and state networks and legal groups, especially on sensitive issues.

AEN networks closely with a wide range of groups, including sexual rights groups, participating in marches and protests, getting the same solidarity in return. They also try to bring other issues to the community through these networks. AEN members say, "During the annual pride march, we distributed the pamphlet '*Hamaari zindagi, Hamaari choice*' ['Our life, Our choice'] of Labia, a local lesbian group, in our own railway station. Why not? People give different reactions, but we know how to deal with them. *Hijras*¹⁶ also come here to the office. When the chemist downstairs asks why, we say it is a space for everyone, whoever and whatever they are. Like that, we become an inclusive space in the community," says Yasmeen, coordinator of AEN.

Networking can be tricky, though. Members of Sahiyar point out the fine line between conscious and strategic networking and being co-opted: "Make widest possible alliances on issues, but never counter one fundamentalism with support to another. You will strengthen both and weaken the struggle against fundamentalism."

Recognizing Difference

Sahiyar works with Hindu and Muslim women. In addition to their main constituency, Shaheen and Astitva work with Dalit women, while MBBCDS works with tribal women in their area. Ayesha from MBBCDS says, "When we started working with Muslim women, we realized that adjacent to them also live the tribal *adivasi* girls. They face violence by Muslim boys, so we must intervene." Ayesha also believes there is a lot to learn from each other, such as gender equality—which exists to some extent in tribal society—or their motivation to work and earn a livelihood. They strategically celebrate days like International Girl Child Day or Women's Day rather than religious festivals to underscore their secular and rights-related concerns.

Linking women to the world outside

Many of the groups' classes aim at exposing women and girls to national and global issues or inculcating a culture of questioning. Jameela feels this is one reason why both boys and girls have started coming to Shaheen's classes: "It is a co-ed class. Imagine, in the Old City! At the beginning,

boys came to flirt around, then saw how the discussion is and they saw what the world is. Boys start sending their sisters to get exposure to the world around.” AEN produces newsletters in Urdu that give local women a window to the world. They say, “Urdu newspapers don’t report everything, women’s issues even less.” The newsletter thus fills a gap and includes little pieces on prominent cases in national media, like Soni Sori,¹⁷ or a snippet from Anne Frank’s diary in the literary page.

Rehana says of Astitva’s Quran reading group, “Within this space we can do whatever we want, including giving women daily news, national news. What is the 2G scam¹⁸, who is Anna Hazare¹⁹? Many of them don’t know even these things, [they are] so inward looking. We discuss TV serials, like the *saas-bahu* [mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts] shows. We talk about feminist issues, sing songs from the movement about sisterhood. Women come closer to each other through these things. Slowly, a platform starts developing and they start speaking.”

Staying committed

All the groups offer critical services in the areas they work in, ranging from education and employment to counselling and legal support for cases, creating goodwill in the community in the long run. Sahiyar, for example, trained women in the community to take a leadership role when they started doing community work after the 2002 riots. Members recall, “It became very clear that men were not there and women were taking the lead. After the crisis, women were pressured to go back to predefined gender roles, but we kept their leadership role going.” Staying committed to supporting the community in whichever way they can establishes these groups as important and trusted partners.

Framing women as citizens

Time spent in understanding the interconnections between caste, religion and gender have enabled these groups to see with clarity the multiple causes of women’s oppression, with fundamentalism as an extension of patriarchy. In that sense, as AEN members say, it is patriarchy that makes Muslim women’s issues not very different from non-Muslim women’s issues. Working within an ideological framework of feminism and human rights enables them to see the state as responsible for protecting, promoting and enforcing their rights as citizens, appealing to the constitution of the country, which is legal and secular. Jameela says, “It has nothing to do with religion. We are Indians. We have the constitution as reference. Whatever we are talking about is within the limits of the constitution.” However, they hit a roadblock when it comes to personal law, where the state has divested its responsibility.

“If we go to the police to complain against a one-sided triple-*talaaq* that leads to a woman being thrown out of her home, the police say, ‘We can’t do anything, our hands are tied, this is not illegal according to your law,’” say members of AEN. They have struggled with discriminatory personal laws for almost 30 years, helping women go to court, negotiate with local *maulvis* (Muslim clerics) or fight for their right to receive alimony. When Shaheen members alert the police about young girls being married off to Arab sheikhs—often returned after a few weeks, after being sexually abused or kept there to do domestic work in conditions of bonded labor—they meet the same response: “He is *Musalman*²⁰, she is *Musalman*, how can we intervene?” Even when other elements of the case can be used to intervene, the prejudices within the police force manifest themselves in this reluctance to intervene.

MBBCDS does try to help in cases, but Ayesha says there is an overriding concern with polygamy: “Many girls don’t care if the man does one to two marriages. Their questions are: What should I eat? Where is my *mehr*²¹? What about livelihood and daily bread? We have to ask this from the state. Otherwise, we can’t fight for other things. This is the basic, like health, education, safe drinking water, political rights. Religion is very difficult. We need to give a girl education and livelihood. If a girl can do this positively, she will learn what is right.”

AEN also follows a similar track: “Women’s right to enter a *dargah* [holy shrine] is not our concern, but the *fatwa* issue or her right to work is. We know she goes to a *dargah* if she wants. What is important are her human rights as a woman.” Instead, AEN uses tools available for all Indian women, like the Domestic Violence Act of 2005, schemes for poor women, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, an act that guarantees all rural households 100 days of paid labor during the year to ensure their livelihood), and the Right to Information and Right to Education Acts. An AEN staffer says, “It is difficult to resist pressures from fundamentalists when we challenge [the practice of] one-sided triple *talaaq*. We focus on supporting the women instead by getting them alimony or encouraging and enabling them to study or work. We are using the DV Act successfully to deal with many of the cases that come to us. Cases are resolved quickly in a special court and helps resolve many of our issues. Like, using it to get an injunction that allows women to keep staying in her home in cases where triple *talaaq* is used to throw women out of matrimonial home.”

Uncomfortable questions

Whenever feminists have attempted to critique religion, any religion, it has cost them heavily, often leading to divisions in the ranks or a drop in numbers. A feminist group like

AEN stresses that it would like to work outside the religious framework, but inevitably ends up also having to work with the tools provided by religious law. It seems to still be possible to have an internal critique of problematic anti-women aspects of religion, and to still use religion itself as a mobilizing strategy to open up discussion. A group which does this is candid in its analysis of discrimination within the Quran, whereas another feels that it is a matter of interpretation. A member of Astitva says, “The Quran has a good message for changing, but only negative [interpretation] is taken. If interpreted by a fundamentalist, it is something, but if interpreted by others, ‘save the girl child’ could be the message. It is our strategy that we work in the light of the Quran. I cannot hide that I am a feminist, but not everyone is like me.”

There are a number of networks now that try to address the question of personal laws from different approaches, but there is discomfort over who should own this process. One group reflects on the internal debates, “Like all spaces, there is communalization of this space, also. Non-Muslim-led organizations tend to take a back seat. Some groups feel only Muslim women should be there or ask for rights within the religious framework, and we don’t agree with it, although we strategically do it sometimes.” AEN clarifies this difference in approach between groups within the networks: “Some groups say, change the community, then things will change [for Muslim women.] We say, change the law, then our conditions will change.”

In addition to these struggles, women’s groups resisting fundamentalist forces face other threats. Rehana escaped bullets. Ayesha and her team were locked in a hut that was set on fire. Jameela faced a group of men returning from Friday prayers who barged into her office and interrogated her for hours. Members of AEN had to face a similar inquisition from intellectuals in the area they worked in. The Sahiyar team in Baroda continues to face harassment from the state for their role in supporting survivors of the Gujarat riots and seeking justice for them. There are many challenges: the village councils, corporations, gun runners, gangs and the state that is apathetic to the problems created by the differential legal treatment of Muslim women. Religious fundamentalism merely joins a gallery of rogues for whom patriarchy must be maintained at any cost. When fundamentalism is supported by the state, the combination is lethal. For feminist groups, the key is to keep their eyes on the things that matter the most—women’s human rights—and to keep the faith that consistent investments, even small ones, will lead to big changes.

ENDNOTES

¹ According to the 2001 Census, India's population of more than 1.25 billion people is 80 percent Hindu with multiple iterations, 13.4 percent Muslim and the remaining 7 percent spread amongst Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian and other faiths. Indian society is complex: Caste, class, education, political power, geo-location and so on operate alongside religion in determining socio economic status of groups.

² A committee set up by the Congress Party government of seven male experts led by a judge, Justice Rajinder Sachar.

³ Different religious or identity-based groups become the basis for vote banks of political parties.

⁴ Shah Bano was a 62-year-old Muslim woman who was divorced by her husband in 1978. She approached the courts for alimony to support herself and her five children. The Supreme Court ordered that her husband provide financial support, leading to a strong reaction from Muslim religious leaders, who argued that this judgment encroached on Muslim personal law. The Congress Party government allied with religious leaders and enacted the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act of 1986, which in effect nullified the secular Supreme Court judgment by allowing for a one-time payment during "*iddat*," a waiting period after a woman is divorced or widowed during which, according to religious law, she may not re-marry.

⁵ Sharma, K. "Muslim women criticize Sachar Report for overlooking their problems." The Hindu, January 28 2007, available online at <http://www.hindu.com/2007/01/28/stories/2007012803720800.htm>

⁶ Controversies on the hijab, abortion or divorce are clear examples.

⁷ See AWID's extensive and well researched publications on Religious Fundamentalisms <http://www.awid.org/AWID-s-Publications/Religious-Fundamentalisms>

⁸ A fatwa is a decree given by a religious leader.

⁹ Various actions by women are seen as 'un-Indian', 'un-Hindu' or going against 'Indian culture' by factions which act as moral police, including celebrating Valentine's day, going to pubs or even wearing jeans

¹⁰ Jamaat means an assembly, but also refers to the South Asian Islamic movement based in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. Jamaat-e-Islami Hind is the Indian chapter, but there are other similar organizations too such as Tablighi Jamaat, Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind.

¹¹ See http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-01-17/india/28360465_1_khap-panchayat-bans-phones-by-unmarried-girls and <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/now-women-panchayats-in-up-ban-jeans-use-of-mobile-phones/1/208814.html> for recent examples.

¹² A detailed resource here: <http://www.gujarat-riots.com/>

¹³ The date of Prophet Mohammad's birth and death

¹⁴ Title for a religious scholar, used interchangeably with maulvi, although sometimes a maulana is considered to have a higher formal degree than a maulvi

¹⁵ Imrana case refers to a publicized case in 2005 of sexual assault of a 28-year-old girl by her father in law in Muzaffarnagar, the area where Astitva works. She was deemed punishable by community leaders and not the father in law, leading to national outrage. Gudiya case refers to a case in 2004 in Meerut district in which community leaders ordered a woman to return to her first husband (who had gone missing in the Indo Pak Kargil War) after 14 years. She was pregnant at the time of this 'judgment' but was forced to go back, and subsequently died a few months after giving birth.

¹⁶ Hindi term for a category of transgender women

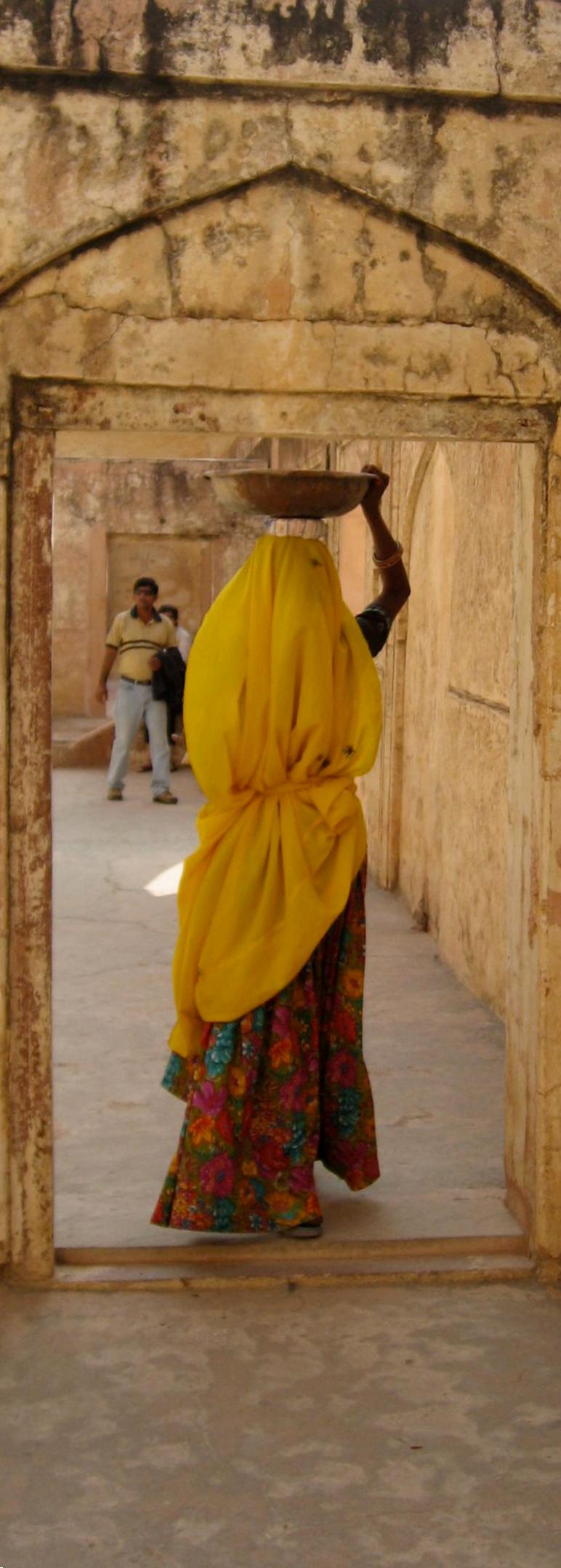
¹⁷ Soni Sori is a tribal woman, accused of being a member of the militant Naxal movement in central India, who faced custodial torture and sexual assault by police officers leading to national outrage and a campaign to fight for justice for her. <http://sonisori.wordpress.com/>

¹⁸ A national telecommunications financial scam

¹⁹ An anti-corruption activist

²⁰ A Hindi/Urdu word for “Muslim”

²¹ The amount a groom gives a bride at the time of marriage that is hers to keep, as per the Islamic marriage contract



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