

## Book Review

**Dr. Dushka H. Saiyid**

Gail Minault. *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998, 359. Rs. Indian 810.00

Professor Gail Minault has joined the ranks of the select western historians like Peter Hardy, David Lelleveld and Francis Robinson, to name a few, who have produced definitive works on the Muslims of British India. There was, however, a gap left by the absence of any discussion about Muslim women in these studies. Professor Minault has been doing research on Muslim women of British India, particularly northern India, and has published extensively on the subject. Her book *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform* is a culmination of these articles.

The book focuses on Muslim reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth century who were concerned with the condition of Muslim women in society. Professor Minault shows a great deal of sensitivity and understanding of the *shurafa'* Muslim culture of nineteenth century India. She discusses the reformers response in the face of the challenges they faced in the post-1857 India from the Christian missionaries and Hindu reform movements, like the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj. Much of the criticism of Christian missionaries was directed at the position of Muslim women, and the severity of their confinement. Professor Minault discusses those Muslim reformers who regarded the emancipation of Muslim women as imperative for the regeneration of the Muslims of India.

Their main thrust of criticism was on the lack of education of Muslim women. She argues that in the pre-1857 period it was only in few

families, like that of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, that women were given education other than just being able to read al-Qur'an. She divides the reformers into those born before 1857 and those born after the cataclysmic events of that year. In the first category she puts people like Sir Syed, Nazir Ahmed and Hali, people whose writings provided role models for Muslim women. These women were shown to have excelled as mothers, wives and as domestic managers because they had the advantage of having been educated. Since the education they were advocating was to be carried out within the four walls of their homes, it was not perceived as threatening the strictness of *pardah*. In *zenana* education, *ustanis* or lady teachers would come to the homes of their pupils to give instruction and so the girls did not have to travel to schools.

It was the generation of reformers born after 1857 which was involved in opening schools, bringing out journals and magazines for women, and willing to question the institution of *pardah*. As the new century dawned, the shift in emphasis changed from *zenana* education to education for girls in schools, and the need to open more and more schools for them. In the latter group, she puts people like Sayed Mumtaz Ali and Shaikh Abdullah, and a host of others who were activists and brought out journals for women and opened schools. She discusses at great length the struggle to open girls schools in different parts of India, and the prominent personalities who played a key role in establishing these. Shaikh Abdullah and his wife in Aligarh, some leading families in Lahore, the Tayabji family in Bombay, and the Begum of Bhopal, were some of the people who played a key role in helping establish schools for girls. The Mohammadan Educational Conference's contribution towards female education and support of Shaikh Abdullah's enterprise is also discussed. The opposition to these schools was mainly concerned with the diminution and dilution of *pardah*, a consequence of the girls having to travel every day to school. Some of these reformers, she points out, were ulema, who were more interested in revitalising Islam than in aping the west. She mentions the Deobandi school and Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi, the author of the classic for women, *Beheshti Zewar*.

The author enumerates the various '*anjumans*' formed for carrying out social service for Muslim women and the contribution they made in different avenues. The book concludes with a chapter devoted to the "Daughters of Reform". In this she traces the careers and contribution of those Muslim women who were the first generation to have had the privilege of having studied in schools. Some of these women were active

in social work, as writers and contributors to women's journals and joined various professions. The numbers might still be relatively small, but they were the pioneers for the generations to come, in carving out a more emancipated role for Muslim women.

The book is not only an important contribution in gender studies, but is a useful social and cultural history of the Muslims of northern India from the second half of the twentieth century. One aspect that Minault has not covered is the role that Muslim women played in the Movement for Pakistan in the 1940s. In the 1940s they emerged as political activists, agitators of the Muslim League, and young female students played a very active role in bringing about the birth of Pakistan.