

(Re)Framing the Issues: Muslim Women’s Activism in Contemporary India

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Summary

In recent years, women and religion have received considerable attention, especially in the context of Muslim communities. Not only has religion acquired a new public presence, but in Muslim contexts the use of religiously grounded arguments by Muslim women to further their rights has also generated considerable excitement. Religion, once seen as the major obstacle to the development of those rights, has now become the solution; women, previously victims, have become the catalysts of change. These emerging voices have been identified under the rubric of a trans-local phenomenon of “Islamic feminism.”

The paper focuses on the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA), roughly translated as the Indian Muslim Women’s Movement, a loose network of individuals and organizations working with the Muslim community, particularly women. The BMMA is comprised of feminists who are attuned to global discourses and at the same time want answers to immediate issues. The network has increasingly used the language of “Islam” to promote its concerns, representing a concerted shift away from earlier positions. Formed at a time following the Gujarat pogrom in 2002, the highly publicized Imrana case and 9/11, the BMMA self-consciously promotes certain markers of identity around which an emancipatory movement is organized, and seeks to position itself as an alternative radical voice from the community. In this, the organization challenges the twin tropes of victim and ward that surround Muslim women. This paper explores the complexities, negotiations and contradictions entailed in the process of claiming a “Muslim” identity in an attempt to complicate the present understandings of this activism.

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a considerable and growing focus on women and religion, especially in the context of the Muslim community. Since September 11, predicated upon representations of veiling and the oppression of Muslim women, multiculturalism has been giving way to a new universalism throughout the world. The rights of Muslim women have engendered debate and discussion and have often

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