



Usha Sanyal. *Scholars of Faith: South Asian Muslim Women and the Embodiment of Religious Knowledge.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020. 409 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-012080-1.

Reviewed by Gail Minault (University of Texas at Austin)

Published on H-Asia (September, 2022)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Minault on Sanyal, Scholars of Faith

Usha Sanyal has written two books in one, born of two research projects involving different pedagogical methods and different classes of subjects. It is not always clear how these two halves of the book fit together. Yet Sanyal ultimately succeeds in making her point about how improvement in their religious knowledge gives Muslim women heightened social and religious authority in their families and their communities.

The first half of *Scholars of Faith* tells the story of the Jami'a Nur al-Shari'at (a pseudonym), a madrasa, or religious school, for girls in Shahjahanpur, a town in western Uttar Pradesh (UP) in northern India. The school is associated with the Barelwi religious movement, studied by Sanyal in her earlier book, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Maulana Ahmad Barelwi and his Movement, 1880-1920* (1996). She consequently knows the territory and is acquainted with its religious history. Having met the founder of this madrasa, Sayyid Sahib, Sanyal asked his permission to embark on an ethnographic study of the school, its daily routines, overall structure, and class offerings. She visited and revisited the school, observed classes, and interviewed its teachers and administrators.

The students of the Jami'a Nur are of grade school through high school age; they live at the school, board there, do their ablutions and pray there, and study a madrasa curriculum focused on the Qur'an. They read it, recite it, memorize it, and translate it into their own words in discussions. The students also study Arabic grammar, as well as Urdu and other subjects within the primary and secondary curricula. Part of the school's routine involves assemblies at which students, by turns, are picked to speak publicly. Sanyal observed the students in classes and assemblies, though she was not granted permission to interview them. For the students' viewpoints, she relies on the research of Sumbul Farah, who interviewed a number of Jami'a Nur graduates. It is no surprise that many former students become teachers at this madrasa or at other girls' schools. One interviewee noted what many teachers know: that by teaching one learns more profoundly what one might have learned only superficially. They absorbed the words of the scripture and sought to follow them in their lives. Almost all marry, have families, and live in the community or surrounding villages. Their husbands and relatives respect their religious knowledge, but their lives are not easy. Muslims have a long history and considerable cultural influence in UP, but they are a minor-

ity that is increasingly discriminated against. Nevertheless, education among Muslim women has increased even in the face of the precarious nature of their lives.

The second half of Sanyal's work covers the pedagogical trajectory of Al-Huda International, founded in Pakistan in 1994 by Dr. Farhat Hashmi, originally to teach the Qur'an to her children and their friends. The Qur'anic lessons caught on among her friends and spread elsewhere in Pakistan and to the Pakistani diaspora in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere. Sanyal notes that Al-Huda's goal is to teach Muslim women the Qur'an in the original Arabic and to encourage them to internalize its message as an ethical guide. In 2007, Al-Huda began offering online classes in North America from its Canadian headquarters in Mississauga, Ontario, a suburb of Toronto. Hashmi's clientele is largely composed of upper-middle-class women who have access to computer technology and thus are at the opposite end of the socioeconomic ladder from the impecunious students of the madrasa in Shahjahanpur.

Sanyal, doing "virtual fieldwork" (p. 347), participated in one of Al-Huda's online classes between 2009 and 2013, a three-and-a-half-year course that met for four hours, twice a week. She also visited Al-Huda's Institute in Mississauga and Al-Huda's online testing center in Hurst, Texas, outside Dallas, interviewing students and employees. Although Sanyal did not interview Farhat Hashmi, she did meet and conversed with Hashmi's daughter, Taimiyya Zubair. She thus had experience with Hashmi's operation, both in person and via its extensive digital network. She summarizes this experience as demonstrating "the continuous nature of the learning experience for students at Al-Huda and the way ... the Qur'anic text ... is translated into action" (p. 334). She then parallels this with the effects of Qur'anic learning on the lives of the students at Jami'a Nur. She refers to the "apples and oranges" (p. 364) nature

of these two groups of Muslim women, but hopes to have demonstrated the similarities.

Usha Sanyal's comparison of these two contemporary examples of Muslim women's encounters with Qur'anic learning is an example of dedicated and culturally sensitive research. By raising the "apples and oranges" question herself, she challenges possible, legitimate objections to her conclusions. As noted at the outset of this review, she succeeds in relating the two halves of her book, but like Qur'anic study, arriving at this conclusion requires patience.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Gail Minault. Review of Sanyal, Usha. *Scholars of Faith: South Asian Muslim Women and the Embodiment of Religious Knowledge*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. September, 2022.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57200>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.