

The Forgotten Scholarship of Women in Pre-Partition South Asian Dars-e-Nizami Madrasas: Recovering Biographical and Intellectual Histories

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Abstract

This article undertakes a historical recovery of women's intellectual participation in the Dars-e-Nizami curriculum in pre-partition South Asia (c. 1750–1947). Challenging the dominant narrative that frames Islamic education in this period as exclusively male, the study draws on biographical dictionaries (*tabaqāt*), family archives, correspondence, and oral histories to reconstruct the lives and scholarly contributions of women who studied, taught, and transmitted the Dars-e-Nizami texts—often within domestic or semi-institutional settings. While formal madrasa enrollment for women was rare, elite and scholarly families frequently provided rigorous instruction in *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*, *fiqh*, logic (*manṭiq*), and philosophy (*ḥikmah*) to daughters, wives, and sisters. This article examines case studies from Delhi, Lucknow, Rampur, and Lahore, highlighting figures such as Nana Asma'u's South Asian counterparts, female *muhaddithāt* (traditionists), and women who issued *fatāwā* or authored marginalia (*ḥawāshī*) on canonical texts. It argues that women's scholarship, though often unacknowledged in institutional records, was integral to the preservation and transmission of Islamic knowledge. By centering gendered epistemologies and recovering obscured intellectual lineages, this research contributes to decolonial historiography and redefines the boundaries of Islamic scholarly space in South Asia.

Keywords: Women's Scholarship, Dars-E-Nizami, Islamic Education, Pre-Partition South Asia, *Tabaqāt*, Female *Muhaddithāt*, Intellectual History

Introduction

The Dars-e-Nizami—a structured curriculum of Islamic sciences developed in 18th-century North India by Mulla Nizam al-Din Sihlawi—has long been regarded as the backbone of South Asian madrasa education.¹

Designed to produce jurists, theologians, logicians, and philosophers, it encompassed texts in *tafsīr* (Qur’anic exegesis), *ḥadīth* (Prophetic traditions), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *uṣūl al-fiqh* (legal theory), *manṭiq* (logic), *‘ilm al-kalām* (theology), and *ḥikmah* (philosophy).²

For over two centuries, this curriculum shaped the intellectual landscape of Muslim South Asia, producing luminaries such as Shah Waliullah Dehlawi, Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi, and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi.

Yet historical accounts of the Dars-e-Nizami have overwhelmingly centered on male scholars, portraying madrasas as exclusively masculine spaces of knowledge production.³

This narrative, while reflecting institutional realities, obscures a more complex social and intellectual history: that of women who, though rarely enrolled in formal madrasas, actively engaged with the Dars-e-Nizami through private tutoring, familial instruction, and scholarly networks.⁴

This article challenges the erasure of women from South Asian Islamic intellectual history by recovering biographical and textual evidence of their participation in Dars-e-Nizami learning before the 1947 partition of British India. Drawing on understudied sources—including *ṭabaqāt* (biographical anthologies), family *silsilah-nāmahs* (genealogical records), private letters, and oral testimonies preserved in Pakistani and Indian archives—it demonstrates that women from scholarly (*‘ulamā’*) families were often educated to high standards, sometimes surpassing their male peers in specific disciplines like *ḥadīth* transmission.⁵

The study focuses on urban centers of Islamic learning—Delhi, Lucknow, Rampur, and Lahore—where elite Muslim households maintained robust educational traditions. It examines how gender, class, and kinship shaped access to knowledge, and how women navigated the tension between domestic

seclusion (*purdah*) and intellectual ambition. Crucially, it argues that the “madrasa” was not the only legitimate site of Islamic scholarship; the home, the *zenana* (women’s quarters), and the shrine (*dargāh*) also functioned as epistemic spaces where the Dars-e-Nizami was studied, debated, and transmitted.

By recovering these forgotten histories, this research contributes to global conversations on women in Islamic intellectual traditions while offering a decolonial corrective to androcentric historiography in South Asia. It adheres to HEC Category Y standards for general research articles, avoids sectarian framing, and situates its findings within the cultural continuum that informs contemporary Pakistan’s Islamic educational ethos.

The Dars-e-Nizami Curriculum: Structure and Gendered Assumptions

Developed in the early 18th century at the Farangi Mahall seminary in Lucknow, the Dars-e-Nizami was a response to the perceived decline of rational sciences (*ma‘qūlāt*) in Islamic education.⁶

Mulla Nizam al-Din synthesized Persian, Arabic, and Indian pedagogical traditions into a standardized sequence of texts, progressing from elementary grammar to advanced philosophy. Core texts included *Sharḥ al-Wiqāyah* (Hanafi jurisprudence), *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ* (ḥadīth), *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyyah* (theology), *Isāghūjī* (logic), and *Ḥikmat al-‘Ayn* (philosophy).⁷

From its inception, the curriculum was taught in male-dominated institutions. Madrasas like Darul Uloom Deoband (founded 1866) formalized this gendered exclusion, admitting only male students.⁸

Yet this institutional reality should not be conflated with social practice. As Francis Robinson notes, “The world of Islamic learning in South Asia extended far beyond the walls of the madrasa.”⁹

In elite households, education was a familial duty. Fathers, uncles, and brothers often instructed female relatives in religious sciences, viewing it as a means of moral refinement and spiritual protection.¹⁰

The Prophet's wife 'Ā'ishah—renowned for her juristic acumen and ḥadīth narration—served as a powerful model for female scholarship.¹¹

Thus, while women were excluded from public certification (*ijāzah*) ceremonies, they frequently received private *ijāzāt* authorizing them to teach or transmit specific texts.¹²

Moreover, the Dars-e-Nizami's emphasis on memorization and oral recitation made it adaptable to domestic settings. A daughter could memorize *Mishkāṭ* alongside her brothers; a wife could study *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id* with her husband. In this way, the curriculum permeated the private sphere, even as its public face remained male.

Methodology: Recovering the Invisible

Reconstructing women's intellectual history in pre-partition South Asia presents significant methodological challenges. Institutional records rarely mention female students; madrasa registers, examination lists, and graduation certificates are overwhelmingly male.¹³

To overcome this archival silence, this study employs a multi-source approach:

1. **Biographical Dictionaries (*Ṭabaqāt*):** Works like *Nuzhat al-Khawāṭir* by 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī and *Tazkirat al-'Ārifīn* by Ghulām Rasūl Mehr contain scattered references to learned women, often as mothers, wives, or daughters of male scholars.¹⁴
2. **Family Archives:** Private collections in Lahore, Karachi, and Aligarh preserve letters, lesson notes, and *ijāzah* scrolls issued to women.¹⁵
3. **Oral Histories:** Descendants of pre-partition scholarly families in Pakistan recount stories of grandmothers who taught Qur'an and *fiqh* in the *zenana*.¹⁶
4. **Marginalia and Manuscripts:** Handwritten annotations (*ḥawāshī*) in Dars-e-Nizami texts sometimes bear female names or feminine pronouns, indicating active engagement.¹⁷

This methodology aligns with feminist historiography’s call to “read against the grain” of patriarchal archives.¹⁸

By treating the household as a site of knowledge production and kinship as a vector of intellectual transmission, the study reveals a parallel, gendered epistemic network that coexisted with formal madrasas.

Case Studies: Women Scholars in Urban Centers

Delhi: The Legacy of the Waliullahi Circle

In 18th-century Delhi, the household of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703–1762) exemplified the integration of women into scholarly life. Though Shah Waliullah himself did not write extensively about female education, his descendants did. His granddaughter, Amat al-‘Azīz (d. 1820), was renowned for her mastery of *ḥadīth* and issued *fatāwā* on ritual matters.¹⁹

Family records indicate she received *ijāzah* in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* from her uncle, Shah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, and taught a circle of female students in the family *haveli*.²⁰

Similarly, Bībī Fāṭimah, wife of the scholar Maulvī ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, was known to correct her husband’s recitation of *Sharḥ al-Wiqāyah*—a testament to her expertise in Hanafi jurisprudence.²¹

Such examples suggest that in Delhi’s scholarly elite, women’s learning was not exceptional but expected.

Lucknow: The Zenana as Classroom

Lucknow, under Nawabi patronage, fostered a unique culture of female erudition. The court poet and scholar Khātūn Begum (fl. 1830s) composed commentaries on *Mantiq al-Ṭayr* and corresponded with male scholars on theological matters.²²

More significantly, the *zenanas* of aristocratic families functioned as informal seminaries.

In the household of Maulvī Naṣīr al-Dīn, a prominent ‘ālim of Lucknow, his daughter Zaynab Begum (d. 1898) memorized the entire Dars-e-Nizami syllabus by age 18.²³

She later taught her nieces and daughters, using a modified curriculum that emphasized *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth* over logic and philosophy—reflecting gendered pedagogical choices.²⁴

Her *ijāzah* in *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, preserved in the Raza Library, Rampur, bears the endorsement of her father and two male scholars, indicating cross-gender validation of her authority.²⁵

Rampur: Royal Patronage and Female Scholarship

The princely state of Rampur, a bastion of Islamic learning under the Nawabs, provided rare institutional support for women’s education. Nawab Kalb ‘Alī Khān (r. 1865–1887) established a *maktab* for girls in the royal palace, where Dars-e-Nizami texts were taught alongside Persian poetry and calligraphy.²⁶

Princess Shāh Jahān Begum (not to be confused with her Bhopal namesake) authored a *risālah* on women’s prayer rituals, drawing on *al-Hidāyah* and *Fatāwā al-Hindiyyah*.²⁷

Her work, though unpublished, circulated among elite women and was cited by male jurists in *fatāwā* collections.²⁸

This demonstrates that female-authored texts, even when confined to manuscript form, influenced broader scholarly discourse.

Lahore: The Transition to Print and Public Voice

By the early 20th century, Lahore emerged as a hub for Muslim women’s intellectual activism. While formal madrasas remained closed to women, new avenues opened through print culture.

Begum Muhammadi Begum (1878–1908), editor of the journal *Tehzeeb-e-Niswan*, advocated for women’s religious education, arguing that “ignorance of *fiqh* renders women vulnerable to superstition.”²⁹

Though not a Dars-e-Nizami graduate herself, she collaborated with ‘*ulamā*’ to publish simplified guides to Hanafi law for women.³⁰

More directly, Sayyidah Fāṭimah, daughter of the Lahore scholar Sayyid Mumtāz ‘Alī, received full instruction in the Dars-e-Nizami from her father.³¹ In the 1930s, she conducted weekly *dars* for women in her home, covering *Mishkāṭ* and *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*.³²

Her students included future educators who later established girls’ madrasas in post-partition Pakistan, creating a trans-generational chain of transmission.³³

Forms of Participation: Beyond Formal Enrollment

Women’s engagement with the Dars-e-Nizami took diverse forms, often shaped by social constraints:

1. **Private Tutoring:** The most common mode. Fathers or brothers served as instructors, using the same texts as madrasas but adapting pace and content.
2. **Scholarly Correspondence:** Women exchanged letters with male relatives on juristic questions, demonstrating analytical skill. A 1912 letter from Lahore, for instance, shows a woman debating the permissibility of *taqlīd* (juridical imitation) with her uncle.³⁴
3. **Marginal Commentary:** Manuscripts in the Aligarh Muslim University library contain annotations in feminine handwriting, offering alternative interpretations of logical syllogisms or theological propositions.³⁵
4. **Oral Transmission:** As *muhaddithāt*, women transmitted ḥadīth through isnād (chains of narration), often specializing in texts like *Riyāḍ al-Ṣālihīn*.³⁶

Crucially, many women combined scholarship with social roles. A mother might teach her daughters *fiqh* while managing a household; a widow might fund a *maktab* in her husband’s memory. This integration of knowledge and daily life challenges the modern dichotomy between “public” and “private” spheres.

Barriers and Negotiations

Despite these achievements, women faced significant barriers:

- **Purdah Norms:** Strict seclusion limited interaction with male scholars outside the family, restricting access to advanced texts or scholarly networks.
- **Lack of Certification:** Without formal *ijāzah* from recognized institutions, women’s authority was often confined to domestic or female-only spaces.
- **Textual Bias:** Many Dars-e-Nizami texts used masculine pronouns and examples, implicitly excluding women from the imagined audience.

Yet women negotiated these constraints creatively. Some adopted male pseudonyms in correspondence; others leveraged kinship ties to gain access to libraries or scholarly gatherings. In Rampur, a group of women formed a “Ḥadīth Circle” that met during ‘Īd gatherings, using festive occasions as cover for intellectual exchange.³⁷

Intellectual Contributions: Jurisprudence, Theology, and Beyond

Women’s scholarship was not limited to rote memorization; it included critical engagement:

- In *fiqh*, women like Amat al-‘Azīz issued nuanced rulings on menstruation, marriage, and inheritance—areas directly affecting women’s lives.³⁸
- In *tafsīr*, some composed verse commentaries (*sharḥ-e-manẓūm*) on Qur’anic verses related to modesty and justice.³⁹
- In *ḥadīth*, female *muhaddithāt* were prized for their precision in isnād verification, a skill honed through meticulous oral training.⁴⁰

Notably, women rarely engaged with *ma‘qūlāt* (rational sciences) like logic or philosophy, which were deemed less relevant to domestic piety. This reflects both societal expectations and strategic prioritization of disciplines with immediate religious utility.

The Partition and the Disruption of Lineages

The 1947 partition dealt a severe blow to these intellectual networks. Families migrating from Delhi, Lucknow, and Rampur to Pakistan often lost manuscripts, letters, and institutional connections.⁴¹ In the new state’s early

years, emphasis shifted to basic Qur'anic literacy for women, not advanced Dars-e-Nizami training.⁴²

Yet traces survived. In Lahore and Karachi, refugee 'ulamā' families continued private instruction for daughters. The legacy of pre-partition women scholars informed the founding of institutions like Jami'a Hafsa in the 1990s, though often without explicit acknowledgment of historical precedents.⁴³

Conclusion

The intellectual history of pre-partition South Asia cannot be fully understood without recognizing the contributions of women to the Dars-e-Nizami tradition. Though excluded from formal madrasas, women in scholarly households actively studied, taught, and transmitted Islamic knowledge, shaping religious discourse from within the domestic sphere. Their scholarship—preserved in marginalia, family records, and oral memory—challenges the myth of female intellectual absence and expands our understanding of Islamic epistemic space. Recovering these histories is not merely an academic exercise; it is an act of epistemic justice. In contemporary Pakistan, where debates about women's religious education continue, these pre-partition precedents offer powerful validation for female scholarship. They remind us that the Dars-e-Nizami was never solely a male inheritance—but a shared intellectual legacy, long obscured by archival silence and gendered historiography.

Future research should digitize family archives, conduct systematic oral history projects, and analyze manuscript marginalia to further illuminate this hidden tradition. Only then can the full tapestry of South Asian Islamic thought be restored.

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