

Aisha, the madrasah teacher

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Aisha's classroom was at one end of the veranda onto which all the other girls' classrooms opened, upstairs and out of sight of the mosque and the boys' classrooms surrounding the *madrasah* courtyard. The classroom was some three meters square, and its dingy paintwork and borrowed light made it hard to adjust to the dimness after the glaring sunlight outside. Aisha was sitting on rush matting behind a low bench, wearing a full-length black robe, with long sleeves buttoned at the cuffs. She had wrapped a large black *dupattā* with black lace edging around her shoulders and over her head twice, securing it round her chin and temples so that only her face was showing. It was about 2 p.m. and she had just finished teaching for the day. She invited us—Patricia and Manjula—to sit down on the matting in front of her desk.²

Aisha's pupils—half a dozen teenage girls only a few years her junior—had been packing up, but not to her satisfaction. She summoned them back. "What is this, that the things were placed in this fashion? *Khudā* [God] has given you good sense, *nā*? What will the big master say if he sees this? From the first day I've been saying that things should be placed properly—but no one remembers!" Suitably shamed, one of the girls started sorting out the mats, but was hampered by the books she was holding. When Aisha told her to use both hands, the girl put the books on the floor, only to be told to put them tidily into the niche in the wall and to pile the matting on top of the benches to prevent it becoming wet if the water pump on the roof leaked onto them. But the benches had been thrown together in such a way that one was tilting and partially resting on another—so the more mats were put on top, the more precarious the pile became. When it was eventually sorted out, Aisha grinned and shrugged her shoulders in a gesture of mock despair.

Our initial efforts to contact Aisha had not looked propitious. When we first phoned the *madrasah*, we were told there was no one of that name. The second time we phoned, we were not allowed to speak to her, but were told to come in person to arrange a meeting. But when we arrived at the *madrasah*, the principal greeted us with his usual cheery grin and a wave—and told us to go and find her. Aisha explained that many of the staff did not know she was there because she practised *parda* in front of her male colleagues. When she was called to speak to us on the phone, she had asked the principal what to do and he told her to return to her classroom. "Basically," she said, "talking to anyone like that isn't right for women. But now I've met you *face-to-face*. Now there's no problem." And she smiled broadly. Patricia explained our research and said we would like to talk to her. She agreed enthusiastically to a meeting the next day—adding the somewhat chilling rider "if Allah wills

¹ Published in M. Banerjee (Ed.), *Muslim Portraits* (pp. 67-79). New Delhi and Bloomington, IN: Yoda and Indiana University Press. We thank the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant R000238495), the Ford Foundation, and the Royal Geographical Society for funding aspects of this research on secondary education, and the Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi, for our attachment in 2000-2. We were in Bijnor October-April 2000-1 and October-April 2001-2. We are grateful to our research assistants, Swaleha Begum, Shaila Rais, Chhaya Sharma, and Manjula Sharma, to the people of our two study villages, and to the schoolteachers, *madrasah* staff and others who so readily answered our questions. For more on *madrasahs* in Bijnor, see P. Jeffery et al. 2004, 2005, and 2007; for general accounts of the educational profile in UP, and especially the gender disparities, see Drèze & Gazdar 1997; Drèze & Sen 2002: 143-188 & 229-273; Karlekar 2000; McDougall 2000; Nayar 2001; Srivastava 2001; The Probe Team 1999.

² Manjula Sharma took detailed notes of our conversations to write up later. Patricia translated these accounts into English, trying to capture both the content and the spirit of what Aisha said. The English words and phrases that she used have been rendered in italics here. We have not included Aisha's comments on teaching and how children learn. Aisha is a pseudonym.

it, certainly, provided that death does not intervene”—and she gave us her home telephone number so that we could contact her directly if necessary.

Aisha turned out to be a thoughtful and captivating speaker, with a mischievous sense of humour. She would look down after our questions to reflect for a moment, or stop to readjust her *dupattā* (which kept slithering out of place)—and then raise her eyes and speak with such verve that her words tumbled one after another. She peppered her comments with laughter and garnished her Urdu with “if Allah wills” [*insha-llah*] and “all the praises are for Allah” [*alhamdulillah*] in Arabic—as well as English vocabulary and turns of phrase. We were spellbound.

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Aisha’s father was originally from Qaziwala, a village close to Begawala—where the *madrasah* was—and some five kilometres from Bijnor, a district town in western Uttar Pradesh. He is a Nai (or “Barber”, one of the lower Muslim castes). He has not lived in Qaziwala regularly for many years: like several other Nais from Qaziwala, he runs a ‘cosmetic shop’ in Srinagar, Kashmir, more than 600 kilometres north west from his home. Thus Aisha had spent her childhood in Kashmir, punctuated by several lengthy visits to Qaziwala. She attended a private primary school in Srinagar for some years, studied Urdu and the *Qur’ān Sharīf* at the Begawala *madrasah*, attended an Islamiyya school in Srinagar in which “history, civics, math, English, Hindi—all kinds of education were given” and subsequently went to an English-medium private school, where she studied until she was about 13 years old.

Then, in 1995, she began studying at a girls boarding *madrasah* in Gujarat, some 1500 kilometres south from Kashmir. She studied there for seven years and graduated as *Ālimā Fāzilā*, having added Arabic and Farsi to her repertoire. Since she already knew English and some Arabic, Aisha explained, she was admitted directly into the second year of the seven-year curriculum. She did not have any special difficulties, though she had to work somewhat harder to learn Arabic. But in any case, “the [watching] eye is Allah’s, so that no difficulties will come.” But for having to waste (as she put it) one year because of illness, she would have completed her studies within six years: “My studies were easy. I had already read the *Qur’ān Sharīf* and I knew English too. So there was no difficulty. ... After this course, a girl comes out with *Ālimā Fāzilā*. An *Ālimā* is a learned woman, and *fāzilā* means someone who has put *fazilat* [excellence] into their learning.” Aisha explained that the name of the *madrasah*—*Madrasah Islāhul Banāt*—means for the good nurturing of girls. There were over 350 students, from small girls to young women, and they came from all over the world. Only girls who were already somewhat educated were admitted. “There was a *rule* that every girl will speak either Urdu or Arabic,” Aisha explained. “No other language would be spoken. If girls were to speak in their own languages, then it could come into the minds of other girls that maybe bad things are being said about them.”

How had her father heard about the *madrasah*? Aisha explained that he was a *Jama`atī*—involved in the Islamic missionary or *tablighī* movement—and thus he knows many people: “Those people told him about the *madrasah* in Gujarat. They told him it’s a very big *madrasah* and alongside Urdu and Farsi they teach *typing*, *sewing*. And there’s a *hostel*. In the *hostel* there are all kinds of conveniences for the girls. Food is provided from there, the bed, covers, blankets. They used to make every necessary thing available. There’s also a *course* for *cooking*. The girls can learn all that work.” It had been her parents’ wish that she study to become *Ālimā Fāzilā*: “The atmosphere of our home was very different. There was a prayerful atmosphere in the house—an atmosphere of living according to one’s religion and one’s faith. Everyone wanted me to study and become an *Ālimā*.” Was this also what she herself had wanted? Aisha said, “No—my own desires were different. When I was studying in school, my own desire was to study English and Hindi thoroughly. But when I was sent to the *madrasah*, my desires changed.”

Surely her father’s opinions were quite unusual? Aisha said her father’s *nature* had been different from the outset. “Even within our wider family, the views of the people in my

household are different from everyone else's. My parents wanted to educate me, but the people of the wider family created a lot of obstacles. They used to say, 'Don't educate the girl so much, don't let her go outside [to Gujarat].' Abbu used to say, 'This is my daughter and I want her to study and make progress.' When I was in the *hostel*, these relatives used to ask my *Daddy*, 'Why have you sent your girl to another place? If you can't take care of her, then send her to us and we'll care for her.' Abba used to say that I was his daughter and he had no worries about looking after me, but he wanted to make me into something." Her father, she said, "has great enthusiasm for education."

But many people consider that girls should not be educated—presumably Aisha did not agree? Aisha nodded enthusiastically. "The big-big people, the *ālim fāzil* people have said that everyone has the same mind, that Allah has given everyone the same mind. It's up to you how much attention you pay. The mind grows by as much as you pay attention and the one who doesn't pay attention remains behind. It all *depends* on hard work. The mind of one who works hard will become strong. The mind of one who does not remains deficient. People who talk, many people, say that a woman's mind is behind her neck, that women are less than men, that women cannot compete with men, that they cannot rival men. This matter is true: a woman cannot be the equal of men. In some matters, men are more advanced than women. But this cannot be said in the matter of intelligence. A woman has the same mind as a man. She, too, understands many things and she can give advice. It is correct that a man goes outside and is more educated than a woman. But if he is about to do some task, if he is thinking of doing some *business*, and if he mentions this to his wife, then she, too, can give some advice which even her husband may not know. A woman and a man are for making good each other's shortcomings. If the man is ahead on some matter, then the woman can be ahead of him on another. Allah has given one thing to the man, so he has given another to the woman."

Many people in Qaziwala would not agree with this—so how did they respond to her continuing to study? Was there a lot of gossip? "Yes," said Aisha with a grin, "People talked. They also said things about me—but we didn't heed them. Things were said about my cousin and she had to leave her studies, because the people of her house didn't let her study further. I was also challenged, but my Abbu didn't heed anything. My cousin has remained just able to read *Qur'ān Sharīf* and Urdu. But my household is different. Allah-tālā sent us [to this world], having made us different from everyone else, all the praises are for Allah. That's why I studied. My older sister wanted to study, but our paternal grandfather and our father's brothers, everyone said things and so her education was stopped. ... Everyone pressurised my father, and so my sister was married at only 16 years of age to our paternal uncle's son. My grandfather said this should happen and so my father did it. But my father sent me outside. If the bamboo [*bāns*] is not there, the flute [*bānsrī*] will not play: he thought, nā, that neither would anyone see me nor would anyone cause me to be married quickly. My father doesn't want me to remain dependent on anyone. He wants me to become something capable, so that if any bad time comes, I won't have to look helplessly at anyone's face. In the village we lived according to our own reckoning, in Kashmir we also lived according to our own reckoning. We didn't become dyed by other people's colour."

Her father's determination did not come cheap, though. Whilst Aisha was studying in the *madrasah*, he paid out Rs8000 per annum, a sum that covered everything in addition to the teaching—food and drink, living, clothes for sleeping in, bedding and covers, pillow cases and blankets. Had he been unable to pay this much, though, the fees would have been reduced: the principal is from South Africa and he and his seven brothers are all wealthy. The *madrasah* is built on his land, on which the grains, legumes, vegetables and sugar eaten in the *madrasah* are also grown.

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When Patricia asked about life in *Madrasah Islāhul Banāt*, Aisha began chattering vivaciously at break-neck speed, her eyes glinting with enthusiasm, and pausing only to laugh or think about some of our additional questions. But she needed little prompting.

The girls slept in large *halls*: “Every girl’s bed was separate and all her things were separate. Two girls couldn’t sleep together. Even two girls sleeping on one bed was forbidden. Everything was set in order.” Each girl had a *cupboard* with numerous compartments for her possessions. And the girls could wash their clothes and bedding in the laundry on one of their free days. The *madrasah* uniform was their *burqa*, which was green and underneath which they could wear clothes of any colour, Aisha explained. But surely they only wore the *burqa* when they went outside? “We didn’t go outside!” Aisha said emphatically, but with a grin. “We wore the *burqa* inside the *madrasah*. The *burqa* was long, like a loose cloak and made from a piece of circular material, with a hole that was suitable for letting the face out. You put your face through and then secured it at the throat, and then you spread it around you before sitting down” [she gestured all this as she was talking] “and there were no sleeves. All the girls had to wear it, from the nursery class right up to the big girls. ... And there was a *canteen* [general shop]. Any girl could go to the *canteen* after 2 p.m. and buy whatever she needed. Whatever food and drink items she wanted, she could buy, *juice*, *bread* and so on. ... Everything that was needed was there. There was also a doctor. He was a *gents*, and there was also his dispensary. He was a good and expert doctor. If any girl’s health became bad, she’d be taken to the dispensary.”

Did the *madrasah* monitor the pupils’ visitors closely, as happens in other girls’ *madrasahs*? Aisha said her family members visited her. They also telephoned from Kashmir to check how she was, but “the students didn’t talk on the telephone. Our Principal-saheb himself would talk on the phone and afterwards he used to tell us that a phone call had come from home, there are these-these matters, they said such-and-such. There are so many children, and they couldn’t all be called time and again to the telephone. ... My parents and my uncle could visit me, my real uncle. But not my cousins or anyone else. My real brother could visit me. At the time of admission, we were asked who would visit and what they looked like. ‘What, is there a beard? Is there a moustache? How tall are they?’ They used to get this kind of knowledge. If someone visited us, we’d be shown them from a distance and asked if we recognised them, who is this? If we did, then they allowed us to meet them. It wasn’t possible to meet just anyone who came.”

Just then, we heard one of the male teachers at the *madrasah* approaching. Aisha stiffened, on guard. From outside the classroom door he asked if we also wanted to interview him. Bemused, Patricia raised an eyebrow in Aisha’s direction. She caught the glance and suppressed a giggle. Then he put his head around the door. Aisha was almost caught out—but swiftly hid her face with her *dupattā*, leaving just her eyes showing. She turned her eyes away from the doorway, and he backed out. Aisha uncovered her face again—and pouted at us, annoyed at his intrusion. For a while, he continued to hover outside the classroom, and Aisha kept adjusting the window shutters to prevent him from seeing inside. But he soon tired of our monosyllabic responses and wandered back downstairs.

Aisha paused for a moment and then resumed her story: the girls at *Madrasah Islāhul Banāt*, she said, spent their waking hours studying, taught by a *mu`allim saheb*. Did she really mean a male teacher? Were there no women teachers there? Aisha nodded. So did the men sit in front of the girls to teach? “They did not,” Aisha replied. “With us, they didn’t teach in front of us, *face-to-face*. There were many girls and they were all seated in a large *hall*. Above the *hall* at the front, a room was constructed in which there was a screen” [and she gestured that it was too high enough to see over] and our Sir, the *mu`allim* used sit behind the screen and speak from there. Whatever he had to teach us, he taught from there. We could hear his voice, but his face couldn’t be seen. His way upstairs was also from another direction. He didn’t come into the *hall* in order to go up.” So how could the teachers check if the pupils were forming their letters correctly? “Imagine that he had taught one lesson, and after that there would be a *recess*,” Aisha explained. “The girls would sit in the break putting marks on their work and then would ask him afterwards. They’d tell him they didn’t understand this lesson and ask him to explain it to them once more. Then he’d explain it a second time. Many times, he’d teach for 30 minutes in the 40 minutes. Then he’d say, ‘There are 10 minutes and you people are to read once through the lesson I’ve explained to you, and

you should ask me about whatever you don't understand.' In that way our difficulties were solved."

But what if girls were tempted to misbehave? Were they ever punished? Aisha smiled and nodded. "First of all, our *mu`allim* gave us strict instructions." She straightened her back and adopted a stern voice and facial expression. "He told us he was very strict and that all the girls must pay attention to their studies when he was teaching. He said that if any girl's attention wandered hither and thither, towards laughing-playing [Aisha tapped a rhythm on her bench to demonstrate], that would be against his dignity. And when we were in the *hall* studying and the *mu`allim saheb* was teaching, there were two *checking-masters*—they were *ladies*—wandering around the *hall*. If any girl seemed to be distracted hither and thither or was laughing and joking when Sir was teaching, the *checking-masters* used to tell the *mu`allim saheb*. And he'd tell them what punishment to give. These women would give the punishment, never the *mu`allim saheb*. They obeyed the orders of the *mu`allim saheb*."

What caused a girl to be punished, then? "First of all, not memorising your lesson," Aisha told us. "And if any girl's clothes were found to be dirty, there was punishment. If any girl's bed wasn't properly arranged or it was unmethodical, then there'd be punishment. If the covers and pillow cases were dirty, there'd be punishment." What kinds of punishments were given? "There was both harshness and loving remonstrance. Sometimes there was beating with a cane, sometimes scolding. They gave punishments according to the wrongdoing. If it was a big wrong, then the punishment was big, for a small mistake it was small. If any girl hadn't memorised her lesson, then they hit her on the hand with wood. They'd give one 50, another 35, even up to 200 hits on the hand." And anything else? Aisha smiled broadly. "We used to be made to do knee-bends and ear-holding. The knee-bends were also according to the studying. She who didn't study, who didn't memorise her lesson on time, would be punished accordingly."

Aisha paused to reflect for a moment. "Very often," she continued, "girls used to hide dirty clothes in their *cupboards* to wash when they had the opportunity. But if any girl forgot and hadn't washed them, and the *checking-master* saw, then there'd be punishment! And if any girl had made anything dirty in the *hostel* or wasn't keeping herself properly clean and neat, then she'd be taken out to the *passage* [outside the bedrooms] at night. That *passage* was very big and there was also complete darkness there, so they used to take the girls there to frighten them. Because of fear, a girl would say, 'We won't do this wrong thing again.' And then the *checking-masters* would take her back inside. Out of fear, they used to ask for forgiveness, the girls did, and would promise not to do it again!"

And was Aisha ever punished? She grinned and said that she had been punished once: "The teacher became angry, so I had to be beaten. I was punished only on account of studying. I was beaten during my first year there, after that nothing. And that was for not memorising my lesson. I had to do knee-bends five times—and then my legs swelled and I became sick. But it was good that the teacher put me right at the very beginning. I'd obtained a lesson for the future! And then my studies became easier. I began to study daily. I used to carry on memorising up to 1.30 or 2.00 in the night."

Then came another interruption—some of the younger girls from an adjacent classroom began peering through the window. Aisha told them to go away and she waved her cane at them, laughing as she did so. "You're looking at this, *nā*, the cane? Off you go!" And they ran off tittering. Did she use the cane to punish her own pupils? "The wood has come into my hands for the first time," she replied. "So far, I haven't beaten anyone. But I don't know about the future!"

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It was clear, though, that Aisha had not found the *Madrasah Islāhul Banāt* unduly harsh. On the contrary, she clearly appreciated how the *teacher-sir* looked after the girls just like a *mother-father*. It was hard for parents to send their daughters away, she said, but they did it for the sake of education—and of course all the girls remembered their homes. "But we had gone there to study. If you are to study, you have to tolerate a great deal. If you don't

endure it, then the education will stop. My younger sister couldn't endure it, so her studies stopped. The two of us went [to *Madrasah Islāhul Banāt*], but my sister remembered our home greatly. She couldn't bear it. So she went home and her studies stopped—and she was married. If you aren't studying, then your marriage takes place. Your family think that you are sitting with nothing to do, so it's better to get you married! I escaped because I was studying, but my sister has been married." Moreover, the girls were affectionate to one another: "The girls came from such distant places, and we all lived gathered together. We used to live with great love and affection, all praises to Allah. Everyone was very good. And one thing remained in everyone's consciousness: that we shall all be going away [from the *madrasah*] and maybe we would never meet again in this life. That was why we used to live with a lot of love. Everyone had a passion for education. Everyone wanted to obtain education." Aisha had found the boarding *madrasah* a positive environment, where she had made friends from around the world and developed a taste for studying Islamic subjects, rather than Hindi, English, civics and history, which had appealed before she left Kashmir.

And Aisha's hopes for the future, did she want to study some more, or continue to teach? "I have the desire to do so, if Allah wills," Aisha said. "May Allah-tālā command the acceptance of my prayer. ... In future, whatever happens will be whatever is in my destiny. And what does destiny tell you [in advance]? You only learn about it at the time! ... The people in Gujarat asked me to remain there to teach, but Abbu wanted me to teach here because it's close and I would be able to live in our house in Qaziwala. That's why I began teaching here. ... I've told my father that I must study some more. He said I have two more years of freedom and I can study as much as I wish, Arabic, Urdu, English, whatever I wish." Was her father planning for her to get a good job, then? "My father hasn't refused to let me study. He says I should study as much as I wish—there is no hindrance. But he has clearly refused to let me get service. He says that women should remain in the house but they should be educated so that they can look after the house properly. I told him that I wanted to go to Gujarat to learn how to teach, but he said he has an abhorrence of women's earnings. ... He told me that if I want to teach, I should do it here [in Begawala]. What's the need to go to Gujarat? My wish to teach can be fulfilled here. Children's appropriate desires should be fulfilled—that's why I am teaching." And once she was married? Aisha grinned. "As long as I'm here there is no problem. But I can't predict what will happen in my in-laws' house. For it will all be under their control."

For now, though, she would teach in the Begawala *madrasah*. Over half the *madrasah*'s 1100 pupils were girls, but—the Principal had lamented—most would probably have left before their teens. He wanted more adolescent girls to attend, but his makeshift arrangements—a male teacher teaching on the veranda just outside the senior female teacher's classroom—were not meeting with much favour from village parents. None of the *madrasah*'s women teachers could teach advanced Islamic studies and the Principal bemoaned the difficulties of finding women suitably qualified for the task. Eventually, he had succeeded in appointing Aisha in early 2002 to teach the older girls Arabic and Farsi.

But in the villages of western Uttar Pradesh, it is controversial for a young unmarried woman such as Aisha to be employed—albeit within a sheltered *madrasah* environment. So were people gossiping about her teaching? "People's minds are different," Aisha said, as she launched into a spirited defence of teaching. "People will say whatever is in their mind. You can't stop anyone's tongue. If some people say bad things, then it will 'touch' your mind. You'll repeatedly feel this: why did someone talk like that? ... My desire is to study and to teach. And this is not any bad work. If anyone criticises this, just let them carry on speaking! If we think we're correct, then we shouldn't be worried about anyone else. Many women remain inside the house and nevertheless do some mixed up work—and even so people will call them good. But if a woman is compelled to go outside because of the financial state of her house, then people make up all kinds of things about her. For a woman whose husband has died and whose children are all small, it's her responsibility to make her children capable of standing on their own legs. If she leaves her job at other people's say-so, then what will she feed her children? What, will those people come and lend a hand? Will they come to give

help? This is also lawful in Islam, that if a woman does not have a husband and there are small-small children, then it's her right to earn money by some permitted method and rear her children."

"In any case," Aisha continued, "it's also written in the *Qur'ān Sharīf*, these are the words of the holy *Qur'ān*: '*Tālīmūl Qur'ān ta'ālam, Alāmūl Qur'ān ta'ālam*' [teach the education of the *Qur'ān*, teach the sciences of the *Qur'ān*]. This means," Aisha explained, "that whoever has read the *Qur'ān Sharīf* should certainly teach it to others. You also obtain religious reward from teaching. You receive the rewards of virtue according to the number of times you have recited and taught the *Qur'ān Sharīf*. At the very beginning of our holy book, the letters *alif-lām-mīm* have been written in this fashion" [and she wrote in the air with her fingers]. "No one knows what this means, apart from God. They are the separate letter texts [*harfe-muqatta'āt*]." If you recite each of them once, you get ten times the rewards of virtue, ten times the religious merit. If you say *alif* once, you will get the same reward as if you had said it ten times. And it is like this also for *lām* and *mīm*. But some people are remiss. They don't know the correct way to obtain the rewards." Then Aisha provided an elaborate virtuoso performance to demonstrate the importance of reciting these letters correctly. First she chanted "*alif-lām-mīm—alif-lām-mīm—alif-lām-mīm*" rapidly. "They speak like that, very fast. In place of *mūūim* they say *mīm*, which is wrong. It's written in the *Qur'ān Sharīf* that they should be said slowly and with appreciation. Like this: *aliffiff-lāāāām-mūūim*. That's the way it should be spoken. We can obtain reward without any hard work, without doing anything. Whenever we read the *Qur'ān Sharīf*, we utter these separate letter texts. And when we teach, we ourselves also recite. In that way, we obtain the rewards of virtue many times. We teach others as we recite. That's why it's necessary to learn goodness and to teach goodness. Whoever has read the *Qur'ān Sharīf* themselves should teach others to read it too."

Is giving this kind of moral instruction more the responsibility of parents or of teachers, though? "It's the parents' responsibility to teach their children good things, of course," Aisha explained, "But why do children leave their house? They go out in order to become cultured, to become courteous. People get education in order to obtain education in manners and discernment. If we ever do anything wrong, my Abbu says just one thing: 'You've made all this reading-writing useless!' He only ridicules us about our education. A child goes to school to learn refinement and culture. Children are so quick-witted that they learn by themselves by watching. They see who's talking in what way, how our teachers present themselves and how they talk. Seeing this, children learn. They spend the entire day in school. They spend most of their time with their teachers, first in school, then in tuition. That's why it's also the teacher's responsibility to spend some time in school teaching good things, teaching discernment-manners. This matter is also in Islam."

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As our conversation was drawing to a close, Aisha's brother came to collect her. She spent several minutes adjusting her *burqa* and veil—first with her eyes visible, and then, once she had walked along the upstairs veranda, covering her eyes with a veil in order to descend the stairs, traverse the courtyard and walk home to Qaziwala. That was the last time we saw her. By early 2003, Aisha no longer taught in the *madrasah* and she had returned to Kashmir—yet again the Principal's hopes for extending the *madrasah's* facilities for adolescent girls were stymied.

We met Aisha's brother the following spring and he explained that Aisha had found the hot weather and monsoon intolerable in the plains. Her health had suffered and he had taken her back to Kashmir, where she was now teaching in another *madrasah*. But they were now planning to get her married in the Bijnor area, despite the climate, because she would have to make too many adjustments if she were married into a Kashmiri family.

Then, as an afterthought, he asked how Patricia knew Aisha. Were we the people who had once phoned his home asking to meet her and whom she had called to the *madrasah* to talk to her? He was puzzled. What would we have learnt from her? Aisha, he claimed, does not talk much. Hardly able to keep a straight face, Patricia contradicted him. "You were

talking about education,” he commented in response. “That would be why she had said more. But at home she says very little.” Perhaps she was muted at home—but she had come into her own in the cloisters of the women’s area in the *madrasah*, where she had talked with an enchanting energy, laughing, joking, and underscoring her points with witty and telling examples, and responding carefully and in detail to our questions. Her educational attainments—mainly but not exclusively in Islamic matters—marked her off from other young women from Qaziwala, as well as from her female colleagues in the Begawala *madrasah*. Compared with her female colleagues and pupils, she was much travelled—and she had an international network of friends, acquired through her unusual (but strictly monitored) life in a boarding *madrasah* far from home. Yet, her comings and goings between home and *madrasah* were chaperoned by her brothers and, even inside her classroom, she maintained far more stringent bodily concealment than village women did at home. Her father’s willingness to brave other people’s gossip had given her the space to indulge her passion for learning—but without his support this avenue would have been closed to her. And soon she would be married according to her relatives’ inclinations into a family who might—or might not—permit her to continue studying and teaching.

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