

Dispatches from the Frontlines of the Burqa Brigade: What Lies Beneath

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As a Pakistani-born feminist academic living in the USA for almost thirty years, I have been horrified, yet fascinated, at the phenomenon that has had the Pakistani public and press in its grip these past six months: the terrorizing tactics of Pakistan's self-appointed "moral police," the band of women popularly referred to by the secular elite of Pakistan as the Burqa Brigade, or, by the more titillatingly sexist (and sexy) label, "Chicks With Sticks."

So, when I arrived in Lahore in the blistering heat of June and began reading about the escalating public theatrics of this group of women operating as the moral militants of the Lal Masjid clerics, being a performance artist myself, I just could not resist trying to get into their space to see what they were all about. Two days before a journalist friend of mine in Islamabad agreed to try and get me into the premises of the Lal Masjid and adjoining Jamia Hafsa seminary for women, the Burqa Brigade of this school raided what they claimed was a brothel owned and operated by a group of Chinese women and men in the city, and abducted them along with two Pakistani male customers enjoying their "massage" services in the middle of the night. This abduction, meant to warn and thence curb "sexual depravity" in Pakistani society, naturally created an international incident, putting Chinese-Pakistani relations at risk. I was more worried about how this turn of events would affect my own entry into the madrassa and the masjid. Luckily for me-never mind for the captives and the two governments-the Chicks with Sticks and their male leaders decided to release the hostages in a gesture of goodwill as long as the warning served its purpose. And so I got in and did not realize that a day later would have been too late, since the Pakistani Army Rangers surrounded the masjid and adjoining Jamia Hafsa the very next day, and just this morning, July 3rd, exactly a week after my entry, a Ranger and a Policeman have been killed, according to the news media, by a shot emanating from within the premises of the Lal Masjid. A day later, 12 people including students and a journalist are also amongst the casualties, and the Lal Masjid stands surrounded by the State's forces. How will this story end?

My journalist friend in Islamabad who was arranging my interview and entry into the premises, asked me to call Ghazi Abdul Rashid (Deputy Administrator of the Lal Masjid under whose auspices the Jamia Hafsa operates, as well as VP of the Jamia Fareedia Madrassa for men founded in 1965 by his father, the late Maulana Abdul Haque), to finalize plans. I was a little freaked out at the thought of calling one of the two leaders of this fundamentalist group of male and female clerics (his brother, Maulana Abdul Aziz, the Head of Jamia Fareedia and the Lal Masjid, apparently never gives interviews to women); the voice on the other end of the phone sounded surprisingly normal, and in response to my query as to whether I should come to see him in Lal Masjid the next day wearing a burqa, I heard a chuckle, followed by: "You are a Pakistani lady, yes? No need for the burqa. Just come dressed normally." Did this mean he thought the women under his tutelage were being asked to dress abnormally, then??

Anyhow, I arrived promptly at a few minutes to 9a.m. the next morning, on June 27th, 2007, outside the gates of the Lal Masjid, located in the heart of Islamabad, near the bustling Aabpara Market, determined to be on time for my exclusive interview with Ghazi Abdul Rashid and later, with the

women of the Jamia Hafsa which is located next door to the mosque. Rows upon rows of red and black-checkered Palestinian kafiyyehs fluttered in the already-hot breeze, adorning the Pathani stalls selling religious objects and clothing in the square across from the mosque and the women's seminary. My friend approached the two bearded guards sitting outside the rusted steel gates of the masjid, to inform them I had an appointment with Ghazi Sahib. The older of them asked for my business card (from my male friend, not from me)-went inside, came out and said to my friend again- "okay, she can come with me. Ask her to cover her hair."

"You should be done by 11, right?" asked my friend, a little anxious now. I nodded. "I'll call on your cell and you call too; this way I'll know exactly when to send the car to pick you up." And then he was gone, as I followed the man with the white beard and the gun into the premises of the Lal Masjid.

Facing me was a run-down brick wall with some Quranic lettering scrawled on it in white paint, and then we turned right and a few feet down was another wall, obstructing any possibility of a larger view. Leaning against this wall were a large bunch of tall reddish-brown bamboo staves, which I recognized with a slight tremor down my spine, as the sticks of the chicks caught menacingly in a number of photographs printed in both the Pakistani press and abroad on the net. I recalled how I had passed the first of these photos around amongst the audience at the Brecht Forum back in April, where I was speaking on a panel entitled, "Competing Fundamentalisms: Islam and the West," with Nawal El Saadawi, the renowned Egyptian feminist author, who had just been declared a blasphemer (again!)- by Egyptian clerics for having published a play called God Resigns at the Summit Meeting. What if these Lal Masjid or Jamia Hafsa folks knew I had been maligning them in the West, cavorting around with blasphemers like Nawal??

Suddenly, I came upon a small clearing, and was startled to see a group of men and boys, some standing, a few sitting on a couple of charpais, and on a low wall near a room-like structure to my right. Arabic sounds of Quranic chanting were emanating from a loudspeaker somewhere, filling the compound, and the men, equally startled to see me in high heels with toes exposed (I suddenly became painfully aware of my toenails painted bright red), straightened up and clutched at their AK-47s ever so slightly. They all wore black turbans, and had the straggly black beards and shalwar-kameezes and pathani sandals we have come to know as the uniform of the Taliban, and each and every one of them sported a semi-automatic weapon slung across his shoulders. My guide stopped, and as though struck by an afterthought, asked what I was carrying in my two bags, and without waiting for an answer even, informed me I'd have to leave the bags behind with him before I could proceed further into this walled compound to meet with Ghazi Sahib. I told him I couldn't do that since I needed my recorder to tape the interview, as well as my camera to take some pictures. I told him I'd checked with Ghazi sahib and he'd said it was okay, and then I asked if I could photograph the men with the guns. At that, the man turned around, and said he would lead me back to some waiting room, and then inform Mr Ghazi who could decide what to do with me. As I was protesting against being led away from this spot, luckily for me Mr Ghazi made his appearance from beyond another corner in the maze of the compound, and asked if I was the woman coming for the interview. When I answered in the affirmative, he motioned the guard away, and I was asked to follow him, bags and all.

Reed walls erected another barrier to vision and then, as we turned yet another corner, Ghazi sahib stopped in front of a low-lying building-a room really, with a little awning of straw and corrugated steel, and bade me enter his office. Here, as I sat across from him on a small black couch, while he sat at his desk with a computer screen on it, he proceeded to speak into the hand-held recorder I had brought along, with practiced ease, and in English. A slightly built man who appears to be in his late forties, Mr Ghazi spoke in a soft, calm voice, after expressing disappointment that I had not come prepared with better recording apparatus than a dinky hand-held tape recorder! To my left was a

table with a stack of newspapers and magazines on it, which a young bearded man, sitting on the carpeted floor, gun slung across his shoulder, flipped through systematically the entire hour that my conversation with Ghazi Sahib lasted. Indeed, when I asked Ghazi sahib why the Lal Masjid clerics had issued a fatwa against the owners and publishers of Octane-and the staff and everyone else involved with the magazine as he now corrected me-the young man sprang to attention and flipped open for my edification the provocative centerfold that had caused the fatwa. It was a photograph of a male and female model Pakistanis both-scantly -clad in fig-leaf costume, acting out some Adam and Eve fantasy. "No religion allows its prophets to be treated disrespectfully, does it?" Mr Ghazi asked rhetorically. "The owners and models should know better than to dress up in this obscene manner in an Islamic society and worse still, masquerade as Hazrat Adam and his wife Hawwa." He smiled. "And now that they have apologized, we have removed the fatwa. You see, we are reasonable people. We are concerned only to protect the moral and social virtue of our society."

Out of 13,000 registered madaris (or madrassahs) in Pakistan today, the Jamia Hafsa, according to Ghazi Abdul Rashid, is the only school that provides training in Islamic Studies to females. He claimed that this school was the largest Islamist Seminary for Women in the world, with a current student population of 6,000 students, mostly residential but many also day scholars from surrounding neighborhoods in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Both the male and female seminaries run by the Lal Masjid, with a total current student population of 10,000, are according to him, running only on donations from the Pakistani citizens who support their educational agenda of creating Islamic "ulema" or scholars. He said it was untrue that these madrassas are funded by the CIA, ISI etc because now , post 9/11, things have taken a U-turn and the madrassas are being harassed by these same outfits and authorities which at one time supported them when it suited their purposes. He pointed out that the real terrorists were the governments of the US and Britain and our own Pakistani government which supports their anti-Islamic agenda. "Did you know that after the 7/7/06 London bomb blasts, our female students were attacked by the Pakistani police just to please Tony Blair who told Musharraf he was waiting for a crackdown against us? The very next day after Blair made this comment, male police officers entered the premises of Jamia Hafsa and attacked our girls! No one spoke out against it! The SSP was merely suspended to help cool down the issue."

It is both to retaliate against the West's neo-imperialist and anti-Islamic policies, as well as against the corrupt Pakistani government and upper-classes which are all working with one another to promote the anti-poor and anti- Muslim agendas of the West, that outfits like the Jamia Hafsa and Lal Masjid have come into existence as the Voice of the Oppressed. At least, this is how Ghazi Abdul Rashid sees it. "We are grateful to 9/11 for having shone the spotlight on us," he stated calmly. "We have been operating much prior to that event, but no one heeded us, although we were still labeled as extremist and intolerant. And then, all hell broke loose. The US attacked our innocent brothers and sisters next door, and later in Iraq"—still continuing in an even tone, a half-smile playing about his face, softly now, "America has come so far to attack Afghanistan, killing thousands of innocent people, and when people react, you start labeling them as terrorists!" Swiftly, he made the connections between his own brand of militancy and that of the Al-Qaeda types, "The media focuses only on the reaction, of people like us, which is visible. But these are reactions to some Very Big Actions. Brutal action is in the background" I understood him to mean that terror begets terrorism, which has been the line of Al-Qaeda apologists.

As I pondered my lack of good comebacks to his line of reasoning-if it could be called that-he smiled again, and paused graciously so my pen could catch up with his words (I was also writing feverishly since I did not want to rely solely on a battery-powered little cassette recorder). In response to my question as to why he thought he and his gang of seminarians felt they had the right to enforce their brand of religiosity on others in the society, he smiled again, as if at a child, and twisting the question cleverly, replied, "Now if I start practicing Islam you call me a fundamentalist, and

extremewhat about secular extremism?? What about the practices of vulgarity, and and porno..and brothel houses galore all over Islamabad and Lahore, all thriving because of Musharraf's policy of so-called Enlightened Moderation" He trailed off before resuming the thread that may have gotten jumbled up with the mention of the word "porno," pronounced with a stress on the r, rolling it around his tongue. "We here say we do not want to enforce our views on others, but we also observe these porno people," and now, I could see some spit forming at the corners of his mouth, "like that Auntie Shamim, who was reported to the police many times for her un-Islamic business and oppressive practices against the young girls in her employment." Seeing my eyes widen-very observant indeed, this Ghazi sahib-he quickened to add, "oh yes, there were many times that the poor girls in her service were arrested by the police and badly exploited by her and them, they even came to us crying and complaining of the treatment they received at her hands, how they were promised they'd be given good decent jobs and then just taken to clients and handed 8,000 rupees for their services-oh yes, all this is on record with the police-yet nothing was ever done about it! This Shamim has never had an F.I.R. registered against her! She has never been sent to jail! WHY???" He lowered his already soft-accented voice to a conspiratorial whisper; I had to remind him to talk more directly into the mike. "Its because she had links to the Higher-Ups in the government. That's why."

In the middle of our conversation-admittedly one-sided-the telephone rang several times, and Mr Ghazi told the person on the other end to "buy the vehicles, as long as they are suitably outfitted for our needs." I was intrigued, especially when he said, "yes yes, the price is okay; you know best." No haggling? How very un-Pakistani! I could see he wanted to get off the phone quickly, looking at me out of the corner of his eyes. The young man with the gun on the floor tensed his muscles, like a cat about to spring up a tree. Mr Ghazi turned and smiled at me again. "Sorry. And where were we?...Ah yes." He resumed, seamlessly. "You were asking about the Taliban and women and if our agendas are similar." :Well, before you answer that, Ghazi Sahib,"I interjected," I want to know how it is okay in your book to be staring openly at me, and have your women here covered from head to toe. Isn't there,"and it was my turn to smile now,"a bit of a problem, a little disjuncture, here??"Oh not at all."Mr Ghazi was now in full flirtation mode. Except it was all within the context of what one might call the "pietistic" gaze. The two women of Jamia Hafsa who had been summoned to escort me to their adjoining premises had by now entered his little office, and were sitting to the left of my couch, also on the floor. They were clad in their black "ninja" outfits familiar from press photos, eyes slicing through slits, watching. One of the two had glasses sitting astride the fabric on her nose, reminding me, perhaps not so incongruously, of Harry Potter and his glasses, hiding inside his Invisibility Cape at Hogwart's. I began to perspire ever more profusely, wondering how they survived inside those black capes in 45 % centigrade heat with humidity at almost 100%. I was having a hard time just trying to keep my dupatta from slipping off my head---trying not to indulge fantasies of diving into an ice-cold pool, sans habille. And so, back to Mr Ghazi and his pietistic gaze."You know, my wife drives. I am not against women outside the home, doing their thing. I mean,"pinning me with that sly look,"I did not force you to wear a burqa, now did I? This,"turning a little more stern now,"should tell you that we are not against freedom. We are not forcing women to veil themselves. Islam does not say that there will be no immoral activity, ever,"I am sure I must have squirmed visibly at what felt like a direct assault on my icy- pool fantasies."But in an Islamic state, Islamic values would dominate."I reminded him again of the Taliban's similar agenda and what that had translated into for the unfortunate women of Afghanistan. In response, he began to wax eloquent about the "total peace" the Taliban had brought to the country, how they'd abolished poppy cultivation and the warlord system. But, above all, said Mr Ghazi, they announced severe punishments for all the men who would deny inheritance rights to their sisters and mothers."Why,"quipped my interlocutor,"did the world and the media focus only on their mistakes?"To my amazement, he argued that it wasn't that the Taliban were against female education-oh no-it was just that they were trying to manage a war-ravaged country which necessarily meant lining up their priorities."And women's education was not a priority?"I asked, to

which he replied with equanimity, "you know, that is like asking someone who is starving why he does not eat cake. I mean, its like an American asking a beaten-down, war-ravaged Afghani with barely a roof over his head, why his children don't sleep in an air-conditioned room." He looked at me as if to say, you get it, or don't you?" The Taliban were never given a chance to complete their vision. "I shuddered, despite the heat. As if sensing my chill, Mr Ghazi quickly added, "I am not advocating that system. I am only saying, "with a ghost of a plea," that the current system of our own government here is so corrupt. It is lawless. No one fights for the rights of the poor and the downtrodden. The Pakistani government today serves the interests only of an elite class. The ordinary citizens are getting no benefit-the necessities of life, justice, education-all these are denied them. Our only demand is that such a corrupt system be abolished." And then what, I prodded. "An Islamic welfare state should be erected in its stead. Where only capable and honest folks without immoral histories should have positions of authority. And no, "he added, catching my skeptical look, "this is not Talibanization. This is Islamization. Our model is the Caliphate and the Khulfa-i-Rashideen. Then, concepts like "kafala" will be put into place-if someone cannot earn, the Government will be responsible to feed him. Like Hazrat Umar, we want leaders who feel responsible for the death of even one dog in this society!" Time was up. He gestured to the women seated on the floor to escort me to the Jamia Hafsa seminary next door, and assured me he was available for further questions by telephone and email. I walked into the blazing heat outside, and heard him say to the women, "and be sure to give the scholar some lunch. Let Umm Hassan guide her and answer her questions."

Inside the Jamia Hafsa

Out of one portal and in through another all corrugated rusting steel, with Quranic inscriptions in praise of the Holy Prophet and his companions adorning them. Inside, a large central space, "that is our reception area," explained one of the women I had followed, as she took off her burqa. There were two rooms leading off this space, and beyond, I could see a central courtyard, with corridors and what looked like rooms off the courtyard around it. Later, when I was taken on a tour of the seminary, I saw that the central courtyard had several "doorways leading off from it and into the classrooms and living spaces of the boarders. Each of these doorways had inscriptions like "Baab-e-Syeda" and "Baab-e-Fatima" in multicolored calligraphic script adorning them, indicating the sacredness of the space, each "door" a portal into the inner sanctum of female piety signed by the name of a female relative of the Prophet or his Caliphs. Girls, women, mostly in their twenties and maybe some younger walked about, like normal students at a school going about their daily business. The atmosphere was hushed, and there were clutches of girls dressed in reds, pinks and blues hanging about the courtyard or walking from one spot to another. Several looked up at this new presence entering the premises and simply stared. I was ushered into the room adjoining the reception area to my left.

There, in a modest-sized room, I was introduced to eight or nine women, half of them students, the others their teachers, who claimed to be from all over Pakistan, including one from Azad Kashmir, a couple from NWFP, but the majority from around Rawalpindi and other areas of the Punjab. I was invited to sit on the one sofa in the room, and a soft drink was ordered for me-an orange Fanta. No one else got one, nor asked. Some slices of pound cake and cookies were also placed in front of me and then the students-one in particular sporting a white hijab and thick reading glasses-zeroed in on me and began talking non-stop. It was, I must confess, a mesmerizing tactic. She began to discourse about many things, particularly economics, and before I knew it, we were thick into Adam Smith's The Wealth of Nations. Amina Adeem, I think this one was called-then very solemnly declared that it was Adam Smith-and other western economists and thinkers like him-who, because they were afraid of Muslims' combined collective strength, decided that the best way to avoid an Islamic revival was to promote an economic model that would ensnare the Muslim Ummah in money-worship! The

decadent lifestyle that invariably accompanies the worship of such an idol has transformed what should have been Dar-ul-Islam-the Land of Islam— into Dar-ul-Kufr, or the Land of Unbelievers. “Look,” she continued breathlessly, enthralled by the speed of her own words tripping off her tongue effortlessly, seeking to convert the infidel, “at these rich disgusting men of our society today.” I nodded obligingly. “They are not happy, these rich men, despite many wives, mistresses, cars, guards” That was news to me, but I tried not to spoil her moment. She continued, now joined by a chorus of other voices, “Look at Abdul Rehman bin Arif,” or, piped another, “Abu Obeida,” “and Abu Bin Jaraa,” threw in another, not to be outdone. “The point is,” Amina hissed, “these Islamic leaders lived like ordinary folks. Their homes were never looted, they did not live in fear of dacoits. But here, today,” her eyes glinting through her frames, “here it is the rule of dacoits, and who suffers?” The other girls joined in unison, “its is ordinary folks like us who are suffering.who can afford mutton at 350 rupees a kilo?”

There was a sudden hush as a fair-complexioned woman, slightly stout but good-looking, wearing a gray-blue shalwar kameez and holding a young boy in her arms, entered the room and approached our little menagerie.

“Asalam-o-alekum,” she nodded at the greeting of the students and the few teachers in their midst, and extended a hand to me. “Welcome, you must be the professor Ghazi Sahib sent our way.”

She sat down on the sofa next to me, and I informed her I had been having a most informative chat with her students, but that they wouldn’t let me tape them without her permission.

“Oh no, I am afraid that is not allowed,” she said firmly, and then, in response to my query if I might photograph them, she replied again in the negative, decisively.

“Not even with their burqas on?” I pleaded. “No. Why objectify us like that? That would serve only a sensational purposeand surely that is not why you are here?”

She threw me a withering glance, and I hastened to agree. This was not a woman you wanted to be on the wrong side of! Very quickly, she informed me she was a Punjabi-not a Pathan as one may assume her to be given her tall, fair carriage. She claimed to have been in the school since 1992, the date that it actually came into existence, with her as founder and principal to this day that would make her tenure there almost fifteen years! But she was a young woman even now, maybe in her mid thirties with a small son in towwho she promptly handed over to one of the teachers and then devoted her attention to me and to the conversation I had been having with her prize students.

Catching on quickly, she asked me, “what do you think a kilo of ghee costs? Rent for a family of four in a city? What does an ordinary mazdoor make on average in a day? Huh memsahib? Do you know,” she had sized me up fast, “that on one side of our madrassa are homes of the rich and the famous, and on the other side are whole colonies of jhugees? People living in tents, katchi abadisand even in the rich houses, the poor servants are given the filthiest of quarters.”

I tried to counter her claims of dire straits of servants by pointing out that drivers at least, made pretty good salariessix thousand rupees a month“my voice trailed off as a blaze of laughter erupted.”

And do you know what it costs to just pay electric and water bills, provide school fees for one’s kids and just some milk as nourishment? Oh Bibi ji“and they pinned me with bemused looks.”

Just these few necessities add up to a t least 4,000 rupees a month for a family of four, and that doesn’t even include rents or food or transportation or clothing. And how many of our average poor folks can even get jobs as drivers to big homes in the cities?“Umm Kulsoom concluded,”we need economists schooled in the University of the Prophet. What need do we have of Phds from abroad

when our own folks cannot find decent jobs?" As if to drive her insult home properly, she pointed out, "300 people commit suicide on average every month. Because," she explained fixing her stare on me, "they have no jobs." Hmm I thought back to my earlier conversation with Ghazi sahib, and the figure he cited was 3,000 suicides annually.

Clearly, the number "3" seemed important in their calculations. Interesting to note that it is virtually impossible to get accurate figures about suicide since such data is not, and never has been, systematically collected by any agency, government or otherwise. But clearly, she had a point; "the elite classes of this country think of the rural masses and the underclass simply as cockroaches, as chipkalis" And her point was this: Lady, this conflict is about class. No wonder when I asked her why she named herself "Umm Kulsoom," and why so many others used the same Arabic appellation, she shot back ferociously, "arrey, arrey arrey. We love Arabs ... we love our Prophet who was Arab ... and so we take our names from them just like ..." and her voice turned sarcastic as she looked me up and down, "just like some folks love Imran Khan and Lady Dianaso why criticize us??"

Her "girls" laughed delightedly at a comment they had obviously heard before, separating "them" out from the rest of "us" westernized, debauched, elites.

And yet, paradoxically, Umm Kulsoom seemed a stauncher women's libber, free of the yoke of husband and family, than any "westernized" Pakistani woman I'd ever met. "I would care not a whit if my husband left me tomorrow-he and all my other relatives don't want me in here, away from 'womanly' duties, they say they are so worried about me being in here; my sisters tell me they can't sleep at night worrying for my safety, thinking we'll be attacked by the police or army any day."

Looking back, her remarks were uncannily prescient. She smiled sardonically, "I tell them I am not worried. I have no trouble sleeping. Because I know I am on the right side. I fight for the victory of truth and justice. So I sleep like a baby." If she is indeed the wife of the head cleric, Maulana Abdul Aziz as some news reports are claiming, I wonder what that tell us about their relationship?

"I would like to see a classroom," I interjected when I could get a word in edgeways.

"Of course," said Umm Kulsoom obligingly, and turning to her girls, commanded, "Take her to the Hadith class. And," now turning to me, "I will instruct them to treat you to the Naara-e-Takbir that will be something you'll remember, I'm sure."

Did I imagine a sinister tone?

They all got up then, almost in unison, and two of them marched me off to the classroom at the other end of the madrassa, pointing out the dark and smelly classrooms flanking the left corridor we walked through, where young girls studied the Quran and Hadith. Behind the classrooms, on the far left corner, were a row of tandoors and outdoor stoves on which lunch seemed to be cooking for the students there that day. 6,000? Hardly. I wondered whether that figure could be correct, and if so, how? I mean, the area just did not seem large enough to hold that kind of population. And then we climbed up some steps, turned left, and entered a long classroom to the right. A sea of white hijabs greeted my vision, rows upon rows of pubescent girls stretching back as far as the eye could see. Several hundred of them were seated on the carpeted floor, under slowly whirring ceiling fans, with huge register-like books marked, "Hadith," compiled by Allama abu Eisa, "Nasr-ul-Baari" by Imam Tirmizi, and Bukhari Sharif compiled by Hazrat Mohammed Usman Ghani, spread out in front of them on long low wooden planks. An odor of musky perspiration hung in the air, and the principal, who entered right behind me, instructed the girls to shout out the "naara-e-takbirs" they had been practicing in their best manner. "For our American Visitor," she smiled, "Give her something that she'll remember." "Ji Baji," the students replied in unison, and, from the back, a voice declared,

"Naara-e-takbir.." Then, the room began to rumble, as the hundreds of voices combined to raise a salute to God. "Allah-ho-Akbar!" Then another. Allah-ho-Akbar. And another. Allah-ho-Akbar. And finally, the voices raising to a crescendo, recited,

Hum Jaanein lotaien gay

Islami Nizam laaiien gay

(We will lay down our lives;

we will bring about an Islamic system)

Walking out in a hot and sweaty daze from the classroom, haunted by the echoes of those voices shouting their Allah-ho Akbars, I wondered if what I smelt was the stench of purity. I turned to look out at the space beyond the classroom, and realized I was standing next to the communal latrines. Curiosity curdled into nausea, and I knew it was time to go.

Walking back to the reception area, I asked where the students slept, "On the floors of the classrooms," replied one of the slightly-built, darker-hued teachers walking with me. "And the teachers?" I asked. "On charpais in the staff rooms," and she pointed some out to me. Ofcourse. Its hard to get rid of hierarchies completely. I called my friend as we walked back, who sounded relieved to hear from me. I saw that I had five missed calls from him, and realized I had overstayed by about three hours. No wonder he had been worried. I asked him to send the car for me.

Finale

The last few minutes of my visit were intense. One of the girls-and they all crowded in on me rather desperately now, knowing my departure was imminent-recited a verse from Iqbal.

Kafir hai to shamshir pay karta hai takabbur

Momin hai to bay tegh bhi larta hai sipahi

(Unbelievers boast of the power of their armaments

Believers need only their faith to fight)

"So," I began, feigning lightheartedness. "It looks like there will be War then." I smiled teasingly. "Will the likes of you defeat the likes of me?"

The women turned suddenly serious. Umm Aiman—the one with the pretty round face—replied, "Our war is against the infidels, and against the US. It is a war between the forces of Kufr and those of Islam."

Still smiling, I pushed, "And you think you'll win?"

Quite aware of my trap, the whole gang suddenly raised their voices in unison, "The Victory will be Islam's, not ours—Allah-o-Akbar!"

As I walked out to the car and driver waiting for me in the post-noonday heat, the girls asked me when I would come back. "Will you visit us again?" several asked almost plaintively. What could I say? "Ofcourse I will; and we shall continue our discussions further, okay? Maybe I will persuade YOU!" At that, they became serious again, and had to have the last word. "We pray that the

fireshtehs-the guardian angels we have urged to take their places on your shoulders, will protect you from all manner of evil. Maybe it is you who will have converted to our point of view by the time you return to us next." I shook my head slowly, making my comeback. "I like having a bit of Shaitaan in me, dear girls! I'm not willing to give him up you see." At which Umm Aiman threw her arms around me, laughing and blowing prayers (or were they kisses?) my way.

I put on my shades, shook my hair free, and pulling out my camera as I passed through the gates and into the world outside, proceeded to shoot pictures of the women as they came out of the seminary to walk home or in one case, to ride on a motorbike behind a presumable male relative who was waiting for her-covered by their ninja outfits once again, fit to be exhibited. Chicks Without Sticks-for the moment.

A week later, precisely, on Tuesday July 3rd, they have been reported to have burned down a women's college next door in increasingly deadly clashes with the state authorities and the army. The War has begun. How will it end? And what, dear readers, will any of us have learnt?

P.S.

* From Counterpunch, Weekend Edition, July 7 / 8, 2007.

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