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CHUNGI, CHAI AND CHAUVINISM-THE ALIGARH QUINTESSENTIALS

AUTHORED BY - TANYA PANDEY & ZOHRA HAQUE

Abstract

The discussion around the development of the status of the women remains a realm which has remained limited to the delineation over how far the development has taken place in the educational, professional and service sectors but there hardly exists any significant work showcasing the burgeoning of the presence of the women in the traditional social places in the country, which throughout the past remained the centres having a preponderant presence of the male population, and the society have been conditioned to view such places as the spaces designed to facilitate just the male section of the society, and the areas being considered as a NO ENTRY zone for the female sections of the society owing to, at times an anachronistic and rudimentary perception that sobre and decent women do not even attempt at claiming presence at such places and at times a chauvinistic and orthodoxical conception of such locations being just the male-serving areas, where women should not be given the impunity to be at! The article attempts at highlighting the zilch presence of women at the social spaces as the traditional tea stalls and dhabas in the city of Aligarh, which usually keep bustling with the hyphy presence of people from across the city, then be it the students studying at the Aligarh Muslim University or be it the plebeian population of the country who have been accustomed to the idea of seeing no women at these places, owing to what has been the practice from the past or even if they have been a witness to any woman portraying the audacity to take to such places, they have found the idea in itself to be uncomfortable because of the vestigial perception they have developed with respect to women in the society, and some have not bothered to react to such perspective because it has not concerned them as such, and so they have just acquiesced to such an idea lately and largely because women at large have hardly made any significant attempts at improving the status quo via any substantial means. The article discusses the ecclesiastical discourse which has existed concerning the development of the status of women and how it has shaped the struggle of women to reclaim public spaces in the city of Aligarh, also shedding light on how the religious perceptions with respect to women have largely dominated the view of the opposite gender in

framing an opinion with respect to their role and function in the society.

Keywords – women, chai, chauvinism, social spaces, fitna, tehzeeb

15 years from the present ,as I'd be reminiscing my University days, apart from the highly hectic yet gratifying academic life I witnessed, which offered me the opportunity to quench my cravings for intellectual discourses over the eclectic genre of realms and disciplines that enthralled me, my only memories so far as my social life as a student I'd be concerned , would rather be only a docket itemizing the various hankerings of a girl away from her home who yearned to become a part of the city and someone who was desperate of reclaiming the social spaces at and around the University just like any of her male counterparts had the privilege to, then whether that be by sipping in the speciality of the city rather the piece de resistance of the city of Aligarh i.e '*tea*' ,every Alig's first love ,at the traditional '*chai ki tapris*' at the Chungi area ,which surround the pride of the city ,which is **THE ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY**, which keeps bustling with students and people from the city alike all day long or whether it be by relishing my favourite '*aloo ke parathe*' at any of the dhabas in the campus area and indulging into conversations and discussions with friends and seniors over the subject of home, politics, history or any thing highbrow , owing to the vigour produced by the stimulated nerve cells after the satiation of taste buds or be it the urge to develop a fellow feeling at all such places which have formed popular and traditional centres of recreation and deliberation for the university students at large but which unfortunately even until today have not been able to cross the narrow domestic wall of gender and have been the sites predominated by men and flabbergastingly even in the 21st century , they continue being such sites, for the gentry of which, the presence of women is still not acceptable or if at all anybody's even fine with their presence, there remain reasons which continue to dissuade them in being comfortably able to take their friends from the opposite gender even for a normal '*chai par charcha*' kind of time. Startling is the fact that people who apparently may seem to comply with ideas of liberty, egalitarianism , gender equality and a modern outlook towards society and things in general , are so much constrained by the chains of patriarchy and chauvinism which have reigned high throughout their life in their families or in their encircling areas where they have been born and brought up, that their approach continues to be driven by the anachronistic and chauvinistic tendencies which has savoured the idea of dominating and alienating women in all the spheres possible by whichever means they deem fit, in a way that they seem to replicate their particular demeanor at all such social spaces ,which at present

struggles to host any woman, then whether it be by resorting to any criminal behaviour as via the acts of sexual assault or whether it be by casting such a gaze and thereby committing symbolic violence against the women, who show up the audacity to claim the impunity which has been constitutionally guaranteed to them by the Indian Constitution and try becoming a part of such public spaces just like women are able to, at other colleges and universities of any metropolitan in India.

Opinions brushing away such conduct at the hands of the male population, as being a result of Aligarh being a comparatively more conservative city than other places in India, the idea of it being a place where 'one of the pioneering movements in the realm of women education was steered upon by *Wahid Jahaan*, a Muslim woman coming from an orthodoxical family and working towards revolutionizing the basic narrative with the aid of his husband, that had existed around imposing different restrictions concerning dress – code and morality of women following the Law of Sharia cannot be forgotten, a movement which laid the foundational scaffolding of women education in Aligarh in the form of Women's College of the Aligarh Muslim University.'

¹ The gift of education via the establishment of the Women's College is tantamount to the grant of elixir to especially the Muslim women coming from conservative families, who via this institution had the opportunity of accessing education in their respective areas of interest, even if such an opportunity was subject to certain disciplinary and surveillance rules at the hands of the administration, like observance of purdah within the hostel premises, or be it the stringent timings for outings, which were actually kept in place so as to avoid any dissent from the orthodoxical sections of the community, it nevertheless offered a wonderful opportunity for the women of the community to broaden their horizon and develop an understanding with respect to their respective disciplines and life in general by looking at the world through a setup which was shadowed not just by the narrow minded gender conceptions but also showcased the ways to develop a profound modern understanding of the society and develop within a capacity to bring in a revolution and to raise their voices against any discrimination that tends to stifle their existence. Thus the unwritten entente between the families, community and the administration was and continues to be firmly in place which is exercised via 'regulatory dominant discourses on women as repositories of honour (enunciated through official addresses or messages to students), the strict system of formal rules guarding women, informal censoring by wardens and

¹ Shadab Bano, (2018) Wahid Jahan, A Reformer's Wife And Partner In Muslim Women's Reform at Aligarh, Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan Vol.25.

provosts who assume 'responsibility' for girls as fictive parents in boarding'², further the permissibility of such paternalistic practices further facilitate the denial of the legally guaranteed rights to women and the continuance of the same in the contemporary scenario is just not in consonance with the world we're living in and with all the ambitions, women of today have in their mind of asserting their individualism and putting to action their capacities, walking shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts in every realm and shunning away every idea which has the capacity to downplay their existence.

Ecclesiastical discourse on the status of women and its effect on the contemporary perception of women

The factum of women posing a threat to the male community, in general, has been delineated by the reference to the charged word '*fitna*', in Sharia, which means – *social chaos or disruption*, because of the attraction they supposedly exerted which tended to corrupt the male patriarch was seen as the basis of why there was the need for them to observe purdah while they passed through the areas. 'Legal culture, therefore, paganized the zaif (which comprised of the women and slaves in particular) privatizing, sensualizing, and feminizing them. All of which explains the law's almost obsessive concern with maintaining not only a physical but also a sartorial and behavioural separation between male and female'³ and in consonance with the same, 'baseless restrictions on the mobility of women have been imposed at the hands of orthodoxical authorities of the University in Aligarh in the past, as happened in the case of female students getting denied the entry in the Maulana Azad Library over the ground that their presence could distract the male students at the place!'⁴ Furthermore significant impunity has also been provided to the Islamist groups and organizations which seek to train Muslim students in Muslim values like the Jamaat-e-Islami-Hind which was established in 1941, and one of its student wing with the name SIMI (Students' Islamic Movement of India) had been banned and was declared an unlawful group under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1963 as it had taken to extremist activities and the ban on the organisation was extended again in the year 2019, wherein the Home Ministry via its notification had listed that there were as many as 58 cases in which members belonging to the SIMI were involved, then another student wing with the name Students' Islamic Organisation was

² Zeba Imam, Shadab Bano, (2015), Patriarchy, Community Rights and Institutions for Education: Counter discourse and Negotiation for Rights, Indian Journal for General Studies

³ Faisal Fatehali Devji, (1991) Gender And The Politics Of Space: The Movement For Women's Reform in Muslim India, 1857–1900, South Asia:Journal of South Asian Studies

⁴ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1143785>

formed in 1982 ,whose one of the purposes is to make students aware of their purpose in life through Islamic perspective ,and so via these organisations novel ways of interpretation of religious sanctions are put to use so as to give legitimacy to the inequities existing in the educational as well as social setup within and around the University campus, turning a deaf ear to women students' demands for their rights and access to social spaces in and around the University campus. There have been instances at the hands of these outfits wherein they had objected to the screening of feature films in the University auditorium, asserting that it featured obscene scenes and there also has been an instance from the mid 1980s when an Inter- University Youth Festival was organised ,since many girls from various colleges were also a part of the dance and drama shows, a group of slogan shouting individuals had gatecrashed into the auditorium demanding a stop to the vulgar show, forgetting 'that decades ago the University founder had worn anklets on his old feet to dance at the annual Aligarh exhibition , seeking funds for the college that turned into AMU in 1920'⁵ , further similar instances continue till date ,like fresher's and farewell events happening in various departments of the University disallow dance performances and allied fun activities like ramp walks and so, as it again according to the conservatives is not in compliance with the upright conduct a true Muslim is supposed to abide by and consider the above-mentioned as vulgar activities! But in consonance of the above-mentioned, I am reminded of a very beautiful saying from Quran (Surah Noor) which says - 'tell the believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity.... God is aware of what you do',

And this saying assumes significance in respect of the above-mentioned activities as well as other unwritten codes in terms of dress-codes and conduct which are imposed on women students in the University. But through all that I have learnt in my student life, I have been able to comprehend the fact that different concepts, ideas and words tend to have specific meanings in different time frames and the idea of trying to apply a concept in existence at a particular period in history in the contemporary scenario with an expectation of it being able to sustain the social order peacefully as it did back then , in that scenario it would be an injustice to the 3.8 billion years of evolutionary success, humans have been undertaking, only to constantly reform for better, and bring about changes in such a fashion which would align with the social, ideological, political and cultural refinement and development we as human beings have been seeking to achieve. The initiative to undo the existing predominance of men at the social spaces in the city

⁵ Mohammad Wajihuddin, The Making of Modern Indian Muslim; Aligarh Muslim University, Harper Collins, 2021
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to make them accessible to everyone irrespective of gender has been taken up by campaigns like '*Why Loiter?*⁶' and by female students becoming part of events like '*One Billion Rising*' but at a very microscopic level without any great formal organisation of the movement, but the need is there, for women to realise the issue which can give way to greater chasm getting created in the realm of accessing opportunities by the women in the different areas.

The idea of flexing a particular mannerism or the discourse of traditions and cultural values of the University in the name of its '*Tehzeeb*', sounds fascinating only until it actually tends to preserve practices prudent to be preserved, like the harmonious relationship between the seniors and juniors which the varsity has a rich legacy of, or the obeisant conduct towards the teachers at the University and alike, but the moment it tries to go to the extent to incorporate the idea of housing '*well – behaved and disciplined female students*' for an e.g and tends to give a very narrow definition of the above-mentioned phrase by considering only those women to fall into this category, if they tend to surrender, to the hands of the restrictive rules set out by the varsity administration for the women students of the university campus or if they submit their compliance to those males who relish the idea of subjugating women under them, then whether it be by expressly or indirectly denying them the access to public spaces or be it by policing their mobility, or showing their indirect disparagement of their interactions with the opposite gender or alike, therein itself the objectivity which some people believe lies in the word '*tehzeeb*', would tend to dissipate into the highly subjective interpretations of the term which go well with the liberalised, progressive and egalitarian standards of the modern day society we live into. Hence it's high time that conditions which 'ld be conducive for women to exercise their liberty at the same time ensuring their security are fostered which 'ld allow them to safely take to such social spaces and not the vice versa which continues to happen at present !

Relinquishing the past and moving forward

Right from the era of British rule itself, leaders have been emphasising creating a society based on an equal opportunity, a society which 'ld not discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth but the truth is that even after 75 years of Independence, egalitarianism based on the above-mentioned grounds exist only on paper, making its presence felt only via the Article 14 and Article 15 of the Indian Constitution, where contrastingly the ground reality remains far

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/aligarh-muslim-university-women-idUKKCN0YT00J>

from the utopian image of a society based on equality which the Indian Constitution has wanted to create.

There are a significant number of movements which have been initiated, and a sizeable number of research papers have got published on the subjects of women's education, rights, equality, child marriage, patriarchy, equal opportunities in jobs, accessibility to professional opportunities for women in different sectors and a lot more but lamentably the same has not been able to break the lens of machismo and toxic masculinity which the sizeable male population seem to see the world with, and so discrimination and alienation based on gender is born every day for the women of the society to rise to revolt to. Every era needs a revolution at the hands of the subjugated to reclaim the rights which are denied to them, and here in the city of Aligarh, the time has come that woman instead of getting accustomed to this state of schism which has been existing for quite a period now, claim what is truly theirs i.e the liberty and the idea of safely and securely being able to enjoy the same.

The foundation of Aligarh Muslim University lies in Aligarh, which is popularly referred to as "*Pdhai likhai ka gadh*". And so when I came to the city ,my idea of the place was dominated by it being a place brewing with hopes in the minds of people to make a name for themselves ,which is recognised across the country and world over, a place where its mockingly asserted that : *this city does not have blood running in its veins, it has chai...* 'and a place where people share their sorrows, their opinions, and their camaraderie over some cups of tea (they can't stop at just one cup)' ⁷,but never ever I could have imagined that students enrolled in this wonderful institution could be so constrained in their approach towards women that at times via their illiberal opinions they would bypass the chasm that exists between literate and an illiterate individual and hence the condescending approach they tend to exhibit towards women , has made even the attempt at the hands of certain sections of women to revolutionalize the way the traditional tea stalls , dhaba places are hosted, a really valorous and venturesome thing to do, which not every female can afford to!

If one's to trace the history of the establishment of this phenomenal institute, then the first proposal after the establishment of Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College in 1886 was regarding concerns about the need for women's education by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his associates, but

⁷ <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/9/18884/Aligarhs-Brewing-Love-Story-with-Chai-Dhabas-and-Cafs->

things changed for good only when Sheikh Abdullah was appointed as secretary to look into women's education project and played a pivotal role with his wife Wahid Jahaan Begum in shaping the movement for the promotion of women education and started writing articles in favour of women's education in different journals. One of the most popular ones was "*Hum Aur Hamari khawateen*"⁸, though even today Aligarh's monthly magazine gets published, unfortunately, it is not talking about the university's khawateens anymore. The plight of the women, so far as their isolation from the social places in the city is concerned is not just a product of the male supremacist and orthodoxical conceptions of how women are supposed to conduct themselves at any place but is also a result of women not taking appropriate measures to bring a change in the status quo! I wonder why can't there be organisations in the University standing up for fostering of modernism and feminism, which can have both the male and female students alike who believe in the promotion of the progressive and liberalistic ideals in the University milieu, if the conservative organisations via their super-anachronistic conceptions have the capacity to develop a stronghold within the University, why can't all the students and faculty members of the University who advocate liberalism and 'changes in consonance with time' come together to form a stronger structure which can effectively counter the absurd assertions and demands of the orthodoxical groups, though it clearly would be a herculean task, but unitedly it is not undoable for sure.

It is high time that people get okay with the idea of women's presence in every space possible, because, in the contemporary era, women are reigning supremely as the heads of several MNCs across the world, as able administrators in the bureaucracy, and showcasing their might in almost every realm and field today. Holding onto the ancient dehumanising conceptions of women as in Manusmriti, where women were considered to be the seducers, were required to fit in the standards of beauty before they get accepted at the hands of the men as their wives and were objectified to showcase the requirements of controlling and guarding them and hence ostracization of theirs took place in the particular age or the retrograde perceptions concerning the women in the medieval times should not become the basis for deciding the liberties, rights and liabilities of the female population in today's world, as one can observe by taking the opinions of plebeians who make a point to sit at these places as well as University students, some of whom abide by the above notions, while some openly admit of how their colleagues take to passing comments as they see any female take to such tapris or dhabas, while there even exist people

⁸ Dr Abdussmed K, Aligarh Movement And Women's Education, Academia. Education

who seem to be perfectly fine with the idea, but majority exists of the former category who believe that decent women should not take to the places as a 'chai ki tapri' or should abide by the ladylike and docile qualities with which an ideal woman is recognised by, or that women should not be loud with her voice or should not indulge into arguments is something that will take the entire existence of ours rearwards into the age of barbarism and chaos. Time demands change as change is the only permanent thing in life, had not it been for the same, the offence of adultery would not have got decriminalised, triple talaq would still have been considered legitimate and in the tantamount fashion the evil of Sati pratha would still have been in existence! The time has come to acknowledge the wrong and make way for the needful change.

The idea is to introspect if our existence is truly going hand in hand with the changing times and if not where are we lagging, as we embark on this mission of ours, we are reminded of a beautiful couplet of Allama Iqbal which says-

*masjid to banā dī shab bhar meñ imāñ kī harārat vāloñ ne
man apnā purānā paapī hai barsoñ meñ namāzī ban na sakā⁹*

*Translation-Though the mosque was built overnight by the believers,
Our heart is an old sinner, for years a devout it could not become*

Survival is a battle for every woman and it has always been in every age and timeframe, so even if it calls for a revolt to survive, women should not step back!

⁹ Allama Iqbal, (1924) Bang-e-Dara The Call Of Marching Bell,