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The Negotiation of Religious Identity of Muslim Women in Leh District, Ladakh

Samina Rehman

This paper examines the negotiation of religious identity among Sunni Muslim women in Leh, Ladakh. Although Muslims in Leh share the same socio-cultural environment with Buddhists, the differences between the two communities have become more pronounced in recent decades. The assertion of religious identity and increasing religiosity in the form of vegetarianism among Buddhists and strict veiling among Muslim women are fairly visible. Changes are also seen in religious practices, including the imposition of a strict prohibition on dance, music, and alcohol consumption among Muslims.

Here, I explore the manner in which religious identity is perceived and propagated among Muslim women in urban Leh. I discuss processes of identity formation and examine the emergence of religion as the most salient source of personal and social identity among Muslim women. The research addresses the

question of how women use their agency for religious activities, institutional learning, choice of dress, and mobility. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I depict socio-religious changes with reference to dress, mobility, and attendance at lay sermons. The study discusses the motivations behind these changes and the reasons for Muslim women's focus on the collective identity that distinguishes them from the wider Ladakhi society.

Keywords: identity, Islamic dress, Ladakh, Muslim women, religion.

Introduction

In the light of the changing socio-cultural environment, the religious landscape has also markedly changed in Ladakhi society. The Ladakh region consists of two districts; Leh has a Buddhist-majority population while Kargil is a Muslim-dominated region. The Muslims of Leh District consist of three sects—Sunni, Shia and Nurbaksh¹—but my focus is on the middle-class Sunni Muslim women of Leh. In recent years, the region has witnessed an increased emphasis on institutional learning, for example on the Quran and the Hadith (the sayings of the prophet Muhammad) as well as informal learning through social media and religious books. These processes have impacted women's religious orientation in a considerable way. This study therefore explores Sunni women's adherence to religious practices and activities embodying the formation of religious identity within the larger context of the transformation and modernization of Ladakhi society.

One highly visible marker of change is the adoption of more distinctive Islamic clothing among a minority of Ladakhi Muslim women. In the past, many Ladakhi Muslim women wore distinctive white headscarves, but not veils. However, since the 1970s increasing numbers of Ladakhi Muslims started studying in specialist religious centers in the Indian plains. Under their influence some women have decided to adopt the *burkha* (veil), *hijab* (a garment that covers the hair and ears but leaves the face uncovered), or *abaya* (a loose robe, usually black²). At the same time, Muslim women follow stricter Islamic practices in a society where such practices are neither deeply rooted in local tradition nor followed by large numbers among the wider Muslim community.

This study discusses the process through which these women have negotiated and transformed their sense of identity. Secondly, it discusses how they became engaged in religious activities and practices that are different from the past. The paper also highlights the contextual interpretation of Islamic practices and shows how historically the practice of religion was predominantly male-oriented and dominated, for example through restrictions on women's mobility and a greater emphasis on morality and chastity for women rather than men.

The paper follows an earlier study by Fewkes (2018), which is based on interviews with an elite group of *alima* (female Islamic scholars) in 2012. Here, I take the discussion further by engaging with a broader set of women who are involved in *makhtab* (a school where the elementary teachings of Islam are provided) and *tabligh* (weekly religious lessons). The research addresses the question of how wom-

en use their agency for religious activities, institutional learning, choices of dress, and mobility. As Kopp (2002) points out in her study of American Muslim women, a Muslim woman's choice of dress says a great deal about her identity in relation to the larger society, especially if she is living in a non-Muslim environment. On a similar note, given the specific social conditions that apply to life in a Buddhist-dominated region, I made an effort to explore what motivates the young women of Leh to negotiate their own religious identity. Throughout the article, I draw on comparisons with other parts of the Islamic world.

Until now Muslim women in Ladakh have not been a major focus of scholarly research. With the notable exceptions of Fewkes (2018) and Singh (2018) on Leh, and Grist (1998, 1995) on the Suru valley in Kargil district, the burgeoning anthropological literature on the region is still primarily focused on Buddhists. The representation of Muslims in a few other research studies (Smith 2012, 2015; Aengst 2013) focuses on the intersection of religion and politics that establishes the gendered relations through self-control and community preservation. The existing literature therefore has a gap that this study tries to fill.

Methodology

My fieldwork took place between October 2016 and July 2018. The women whom I interviewed were from *makhtab* and the laity. The majority of the women wore headscarves; a few of them wore either a *hijab*, a *burkha*, or an *abaya*. The interviewees' level of religious affiliation and manner of dress meant that they were visibly identifiable as Muslims, and this affected their individual experiences. My sample consisted of twenty-five women ranging from thirty to eighty years of age; twenty-three were married, and two were widows. In addition, I also interviewed four men to get their perspectives on religion and religious identity. I conducted in-depth interviews with each informant. The interview questionnaire included questions around religion, and respondents' understanding of women's dress in religious texts, as well as their reasons for wearing or not wearing the *hijab* and the impact of their decisions on their social relationships. I also asked questions on their sources of religious knowledge and their perceptions about the significance of these sources for identity development.

My sample was generated through the snowball technique which helped me to contact informants using my initial contacts as points of referral. This method was appropriate since it would otherwise have been difficult to identify and contact women who strictly adhere to religious practices. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis in the

makhtab and at the women's homes according to their convenience. Most came from middle-class families, but their religious backgrounds were mixed. A few had been brought up in religious households, but most had parents who are less devout than they themselves have become. The participants were all given a pseudonym to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality except for Maulvi Mohd Omar Nadvi, who is an important and well-known figure among the Muslim community.

I began my research by exploring the cultural contexts in which these women live, observing and participating in various facets of their lives. For example, I attended religious sermons, (which were also referred to as *jalsa*), *tabligh*, and *makhtab*. Almost all the informants emphasized the importance of praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan (two of the five fundamental pillars of Islam), as well attending the *tabligh* regularly, dressing modestly and 'appropriately' (not revealing any part of the body except the face, hands and feet), and abstaining from religiously prohibited activities such as drinking alcohol. Although my sample was not randomly selected, and is therefore not representative, the narratives provided by the informants suggest shared perceptions about Muslim women's motivations for religious devotion, leading to a conscious decision to identify as members of the faith through a process of religious awakening and introspection. I recorded their narratives as handwritten notes during the course of each interview and expanded them into a more detailed set of transcripts afterwards.

Locating Ladakhi Islam

The date of the advent of Islam in Ladakh cannot be accurately ascertained, although many believe that the first Muslim came to the region more than 600 years ago and that Mir Syed Hamdani was the first to make Muslim converts in Ladakh following his second visit to Kashmir in 1394 CE (Sheikh 1995: 189). Shias make up the majority of the population in the Kargil District as well as in parts of the Indus valley; the first Shias in and around Leh are thought to have migrated from Baltistan, starting in the late 15th century CE. Shias are believed to belong to the predominant ethnic group of Ladakh region, i.e., having a mixture of Mongoloid and Aryan (Dard) elements. It is thought that earlier they were Buddhists but converted to Islam in the 15th century when mass conversions took place in Baltistan, the ancestral home of many of these people (Bhasin and Nag 2002).

The Sunnis who form the focus of my study are known as *Arghon* and are mostly the descendants of Muslim merchants from the Kashmir Valley and Yarkand (now part of

Xinjiang), who married local Buddhist women. They mainly live in the Indus valley in the Leh district, but smaller numbers are also found in the Zaskar valley (Rizvi 1996) as well as in the villages of Pannikhar and Sankhoo in Suru (Grist 1998, 2005) and Kargil.

There is a strict difference between the four main established Sunni schools of law, the Hanafiya, the Malikiya, the Shafiya, and the Hanbaliya (Zacharias 2006). According to Maulvi Omar Nadvi, the first learned preacher in Kashmir was Bulbul Shah who belonged to the Hanafi school, which places greater reliance on *Qiyas* (thinking). Most of the early Muslims of Leh were migrants from Kashmir and they followed the same school.

Historically, the *Arghon* were a community of craftspeople and traders linked by a network of religious, commercial, and family connections with their counterparts in Kashmir, Xinjiang, and Central Tibet. At the same time, they were closely integrated into Leh society, partly because of the frequency of intermarriages. They shared a common language with other Ladakhis and wore similar clothing. Hanif (a ninety-eight-year-old man) recalled that in his youth traditional Ladakhi music and dance used to be part of social functions in both the Buddhist and Muslim communities.

Relationships within the community were patriarchal in style and the movement of women was restricted. Jamila, an informant who is eighty years old, recalled that in her youth Muslim women were not allowed to pass in front of the Jama Masjid (the main mosque in Leh) but had to walk round the back of the building. In her understanding, it was a sin for women to be seen in public since the Jama Masjid is at the center of Leh market. Another respondent Khanum (seventy-eight years old), likewise reflecting on her past experience, reported that Muslim women attending social functions always had to be accompanied by another person. In fact, in some cases they had to reach the venue before dawn and leave after dusk in order to avoid the public eye. Several such examples were recalled by my informants, although such practices were far from being universal.

In recent decades, a combination of external and internal factors has served to sharpen the distinctions between Buddhists and Muslims. The partition of India and Pakistan following independence in 1947 led to a conflict over the status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which was claimed by both countries. In 1948, Pakistani invaders came close to capturing Leh before Indian troops beat them back. Partly in reaction to these events, leading Ladakhi politicians emphasized their patriotic Indian credentials in their

engagement with New Delhi. At the same time, they defined Buddhism as the distinctive marker of Ladakhi identity (van Beek and Bertelsen 1997) and called for their region's separation from Muslim-dominated Kashmir. The implication was that Ladakhi Muslims, though speaking the same language and sharing many cultural markers in common, were considered to be outsiders.

Since 1989, the Kashmir Valley has been caught up in a continuous and often violent conflict over the region's disputed political status. Kashmir-based Islamist parties have, for the most part, not taken root in Ladakh, but religion has nevertheless been a factor in the region's own political discourse, which is largely distinct from that of the Valley. Also, in 1989, a clash between Buddhist and Muslim youth in Leh prompted Buddhist-led demonstrations renewing an earlier call for Ladakh to be separated from Kashmir and granted the status of a Union Territory, meaning that it would be directly administered from New Delhi. Ladakhi Buddhist leaders drew on religion as a means of political mobilization. As one of these leaders commented in retrospect: "We had to use religion as to create a sustained movement" (van Beek and Bertelsen 1997: 54). The powerful Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) imposed a social and commercial boycott of the Muslim community on the grounds that they were outsiders who identified with their co-religionists in Kashmir (Bray 2007). The boycott continued until 1995 and was enforced through various forms of social pressure, occasionally including violence (van Beek and Bertelsen 1997: 59).

In principle, the tensions that led to the 1989 agitation were resolved with the establishment of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) in Leh in 1995, followed by the creation of a similar council in Kargil in 2003, and now by the central government's announcement in August 2019 that Ladakh would be granted Union Territory status with effect from 31 October 2019. Nevertheless, the memory of the 1989 agitation and social boycott has served to heighten divisions between the Buddhist and Muslim communities. When I asked Leela, one of my informants, about her assertion of religious identity, she responded:

The communal conflict of 1989 caused a rift between Buddhists and Muslims and has created more differences. Buddhists are saying "I am a Buddhist" and Muslims are saying "I am a Muslim" despite the fact that both have a similar culture. Many people will deny the fact but it's explicit in everyday interactions and relationships.

The agitation laid the ground for a social ban on inter-religious marriages (Smith 2013), primarily enforced by Buddhists rather than Muslims. At the same time, Buddhist fears that the demographic balance of Ladakh would change in favour of the Muslims has led to a campaign against family planning in rural areas, and the propagation of new Buddhist principles that denounce contraception or sterilization surgery (Aengst 2008; Smith 2011).

Meanwhile, Ladakhi Muslims' views of their own religion have been influenced by a broader process of social change, including enhanced communication with the outside world both through personal contact and mass media. In this respect, Ladakh is part of a wider process of social change that extends well beyond Jammu and Kashmir and has much in common with other parts of South Asia. Direct personal contact with Islamic centers on the plains of India has been an important driver of change. As Imran, one of my informants, reported:

The zeal to increase and amass 'proper' religious knowledge started with the few Sunni Muslim men who can be considered as the first batch of Sunni Muslims who went to a *madrassa* (a place of study whether religious or secular or both) in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh in the 1970s to acquire an Islamic education. This was continued by the second batch of Muslim men who went to a *madrassa* in Nadwa, Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh) in the 1980s. The second batch was more successful in completing their Islamic education and thereafter in propagating their knowledge in Leh.

Maulvi Omar Nadvi was among the first Sunni men to go to Lucknow for religious education in the 1970s, together with Maulvi Mohammed Asgar and Maulvi Abdul Quyyum Nadvi. He recalled: "We were admitted to the reputed institution Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama Lucknow in the year 1975 and returned in 1983 after completing the *Aalim* and *Fazil* courses."³ Their studies were funded by Anjuman Moin-ul-Islam, Leh, which is an association engaged in various social activities, the promotion of communal harmony, education, health, disaster management, and other related works. Maulvi Omar further stated that the late Khoja M. Sayed Radu from Zakura Hazratbal (Srinagar) guided them for the religious education and was the Imam of the Jama Masjid, the main mosque in Leh, at that time. After returning from the *madrassa*, these Sunni men then propagated the religious activities of preaching about prayers and practices, and this eventually led more men and women to acquire a religious education in the same school of thought.

Closer contact with religious teaching from outside the region has led to a gradual re-evaluation of the religious values that Ladakhi Muslims inherited from their ancestors. Sadiq, one of my informants, commented that in the past many religious scholars were self-proclaimed and self-educated: the implication is that they were not fully informed as to the true nature of Islamic religious practice. Now, many Muslims are questioning the extent to which earlier religious practices were truly orthodox. They argue that Islamic practice revealed in the Quran has, in the past, been contextually interpreted in Leh, and hence an adulterated form of Islam has been followed until now. One example was the former practice of taking part in music and dance. Such practices need to be changed to save oneself from committing more sins.

Among Ladakhi Muslims, as in other parts of the Islamic world, questions about appropriate dress for women have been one of the key symbolic issues at the center of the debate about appropriate Islamic practice. Boulanouar (2006: 143) in her study citing the Quran states: “Muslim women’s clothing must be long and covering, and should fulfil the clothing requirements (non-transparent, loose etc).” Elsewhere in South Asia, Haniffa (2008) points to a contemporary discourse in Sri Lanka where Muslims all over the country are adopting the uniforms of piety—including the *abhaya* and *hijab* for women—as part of the Islamic piety movement.

However, other scholars and practitioners are skeptical about the roots of the practice of veiling in Islam and argue that it is an ancient tradition, originating in Arabia, that has crept into the present understanding of Islam in other regions but is not required by the Quran (Roald 2001). According to Saleh (1972: 40):

The custom of feminine veiling and seclusion, which has been widely practiced in the Moslem world was not Islamic in origin, but rather was adopted by the early Moslems as an additional precaution against the immoral conditions that prevailed in pre-Islamic Arabia. The veiling of the face is not prescribed in the Holy Koran.

At the social level, Frank (2000) has argued that wearing the *hijab* or a veil offers Muslim women the means to move between the private and public spaces and to be participants, not just spectators, in the public world of men. These clothing practices allow women to negotiate gender identity in the light of their distinctive religious commitments (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Peek 2005; Williams and Vashi 2007).

As will be seen below, a local version of these debates about appropriate practice is still being played out in Islamic circles within Ladakh.

New Educational Opportunities for Women

Ladakhi Muslim men’s education in the *madrassa* on the Indian plains opened up the way for women to pursue the same kind of religious studies. As Fewkes (2018) reports, the first batch of four women attended a *madrassa* called Jamiatus Salehat in Malegaon, Maharashtra, which is an institution oriented for higher religious learning for girls, in the late 1980s. They returned in 1992 after completing five years of advanced theological degrees and started preaching. These women were also the first group who wore the *burkha* in Leh, scaring and amusing people at the same time. Naida, who is one of these women, recollected:

The foremost task after returning to Leh was to disseminate the Islamic doctrines that we had learnt in the *madrassa*. It was not easy since we were the first women to wear *burkha* in a social environment that was not conducive for this kind of Islamic dress. Wearing a *burkha* really scared people who ran away shouting *lande, lande* [meaning ‘ghost’ in Ladakhi]. It was also petrifying as one of us was stoned by a stranger when we were promulgating Islamic principles to the people in a far-flung area. The early years were really difficult since our own community was not ready to accept what we were to preach.

A comparable situation was also highlighted by Brenner (1996) in her study of Java where women wearing the *jilbab* (a local term of Arabic origin referring to Islamic dress) were rumored to be concealing poison: they were attacked and injured by a crowd that also stoned them.

In 2014, the perception that Ladakhis had earlier been following an adulterated form of Islam led a group of women to start a *makhtab* in Leh with the goal of view to explaining the Quran and its meaning in the local language. They believe that the *makhtab* contributes to religious awakening by inciting religiosity among the Muslim women who then go on to advocate new forms of piety in their families. Currently, there are two women’s *makhtab* in the Leh area. One is adjacent to the Anjuman-Moin-Ul Islam office in Leh market; the other is five miles away in Choglamsar. Both *makhtab* are recognized by the Anjuman-moin-ul Islam which provides them with funds and basic infrastructural requirements. Rabiya explained the purpose of the *makhtab* in Leh:

We started the *makhtab* in 2014 for elderly women who cannot read the Quran and for those who can read the Quran but do not understand it. In the *makhtab*, women also learn about Islam and the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad. Most of the Muslim women in Leh failed to understand the true meaning of the text of Quran and therefore miserably fail to practice true Islamic values. We also teach the Quran in the local language so that women can follow it properly. Initially, we started with three or four women but now forty to fifty women attend. Some of them have become well versed in reading the Quran and others follow the religious practices of wearing *hijab* and *abaya*. The *makhtab* was quite successful in creating awareness about the essential doctrines of Islam and contributing to an awakening among those who had had little interest in following the religious way of life.

A similar account was also given by Salma about the *makhtab* in Choglamsar which is attended by ten to twenty women and offers the same kind of religious teachings.

In addition to the *makhtab*, women are also involved in *tabliqh* which are regularly conducted in homes of Muslim women. According to one informant, the practice of arranging *tabliqh* started around forty years ago but was not as frequent as it has now become. Around forty to fifty women hold weekly *tabliqh*.

The emergence of the *makhtab* in Leh has a parallel in Bangladesh where Begum (2016) writes of a women's group called the Group of Four Companions (GFC) who arrange a weekly *Talim* or reading circle for Muslim women and have set up a separate *Talim Ghar* (house for Islamic lessons). These are meant for reading and interpreting religious texts, meetings, discussions and prayer. The *Talim* and *Talim Ghar* in Bangladesh resemble the *Tabliqh* and *Makhtab* in Leh in providing another example of women's collective agency and the establishment of a women's space which contributes significantly in the preservation and propagation of religious identity.

Change of Self: Negotiation of Religious Identity

Access to new forms of teaching has led to new forms of self-consciousness among Muslim women. Almost all the women who were interviewed used the word *imaan* which means faith in almighty Allah and his prophet. They use phrases such as "becoming aware" and "religious awakening" concerning the correct religious knowledge and practices they had acquired from a variety of sources. These included studying in *madrassa* outside Ladakh and

interaction with Islamic advocates, reading books, attending religious sermons, and *jamaat* (moving with groups of religious activists to various places to propagate Islamic doctrines), or listening to family members or friends who sought to persuade them to lead a devout life.

However, they are not merely passive recipients of external truths. As Mahmood (2011) points out, the Islamic tradition is a way of engaging with texts that shape how people live, but it does not simply define how people live in every detail. Truths are made through engagement with texts, not found within the texts themselves. This allows for agency within the tradition's limits. The interviewees' explanations for their choices concerning dress reflect this kind of engagement.

One of my informants stated that she considered Islamic clothing as the "appropriate" dress for women and regarded this as the command of *Allah*. When further asked what she meant by "appropriate" dress, she explained that it should cover the whole body without showing its shape. On a similar note, Rabiya elucidated:

There is no mention of *purdah* (curtain) in the Quran but *chadar*⁴ so people interpreted this word according to the context and customs of their society. Since our faces reveal our identities, we have to cover them and this is more important than covering the body.

Reflecting a similar sentiment, one of the informants, Zahra, explained this as follows:

If there are two candies, one covered and the other uncovered, there is a greater chance that houseflies will be attracted to the second one. Similarly, if a woman is not covered appropriately, more men will be attracted towards her. Therefore, the Quran puts greater emphasis on the chastity and modesty of women and we should dress accordingly.

On a similar note, Aisha shared her experience:

I was a very fashionable woman who preferred not to wear *hijab*, wore lipstick, and sometimes favored loose hair. But, I am a changed person now who wears *abaya*, *burkha* and is very regular to *tabliqh*. This transformation was gradual. It was initiated through my reading books on Islam and interacting with women who had acquired religious education.

She further stated that understanding one's religion is very crucial for *akhirat* (eternity) and that the current religious awakening should have happened a long time ago.

Similarly, speaking of Islamic dress, Sayida said: “It gives me a feeling of respect and a sense of satisfaction. I assert my religious identity due to its transcendental and psychological peace.” Another woman, Shazia, conveyed: “It signifies an inner awareness and consciousness of being Muslim and the necessity of preserving our own religious values.” Rabiya likewise drew a link between women’s inner spiritual condition and their outward appearance: “Although we do not force *purdah* in the *makhtab*, women’s change in their inner selves is reflected through their clothing.”

The testimony of these informants suggests that Muslim women’s choice of Islamic dress is not the result of coercion. Muslim women who are active in their religion—both those who wear *burkha* and *abaya* and some who only adorn themselves with headscarves—say that religion allows them to create space for their own religious activities and connects them more closely with Allah.

The extent of women’s preference for Islamic clothing, attending *makhtab*, and other religious discussions varied markedly from individual to individual. Some women affirmed that they realized their engagement had been more with worldly duties than towards religion, and this awareness made them adhere and show more allegiance towards Islamic values. Several other women shared the profound anxiety that they felt before deciding to wear the *hijab*. The immediate anxiety was the fear of death and their unfulfilled religious obligations. Expressing this anxiety, Sultana said:

At this age when I was quite free from worldly duties and upon reflection on what I had achieved in this life and what would I take into my *kabar* (grave). I was really scared, thinking that I had failed in my religious duties. Therefore, at that moment I took the decision to follow the path of Islam.

The reconstruction of self through awareness of Islamic doctrine gave them a sense of reformed life. As voiced by Noori:

My change of heart towards religious faith makes me become a devout *Khache* (Sunni Muslim) and this was initiated by listening to *alima and alim* (Islamic scholars) in *tabligh* and *majlis* (mosque) I have chosen the path of Allah now.

Now it is increasingly observed that parents who had never followed such religious practices are persuading their children to wear the *hijab* and read the Quran. Most of the informants also said it is of paramount importance to teach religious values to their children. Therefore, they send their children to the mosque or to a *maulvi* for

religious education. From an insider’s point of view, I have observed during my research that very young Muslim girls are now wearing *hijab*, and this reflects the pressure on Muslim girls to identify themselves as Muslims in public. Reflecting on such developments, Mehek said:

My parents were not concerned whether I wore a head scarf or not, I was not even taught the Quran properly. But, I make sure that my children learn the Quran by heart and wear the *hijab*. It makes us closer to Allah.

A similar point is echoed by Koser:

I have recently started wearing *hijab* and performing *namaz* (prayer). I feel more connected to Allah. This change has come within me and I strictly make my children adhere to the same.

However, most informants agreed that allegiance to religion and the adoption of religious symbols such as donning a *hijab* or a *burkha* should be voluntary if it is to be meaningful. When asked whether a veil makes a woman good Muslim, one of the *hijab*-wearing informants replied:

A veil does not make a person a good Muslim or a bad Muslim. [What matters] is the intention with which we remember Allah. I do not abuse and gossip about people and that is more important.

Another informant explained:

A veil cannot be the mark of true Muslim womanhood. In Leh, I have seen many women adopt the veil just for fashion and interest, and for that reason they cannot be considered as devout Muslims.

This aspect of what can be construed as true devotion towards Allah is highlighted by Rabiya. She said:

Women adopt Islamic dress or wear loose clothes because they are in fashion; such women are not following Islam in the true sense and hence cannot be called devout Muslims.

Such statements provide clear evidence of these women’s positive outlook about Islamic dress and the reasoning behind their choices. Nevertheless, these forms of dress are still not accepted by a majority of the Muslim women in Leh and not all Muslims agree with the practice of veiling; some even oppose it strongly. As one of my informants ruefully observed:

Our own people do not support the effort of spreading religious knowledge and values. They try to hold us back and criticize our initiatives.

The critics of Islamic dress argue that even the Quran has not mentioned this style of covering. Its adoption for daily wear is a departure from the local past which is not suitable culturally in the Ladakhi context. Echoing these sentiments, Hajira said:

I believe veiling is important, but it's not suited to Leh as we have to maintain social relations with Buddhists and with *burkha* it is impossible to work in social functions like marriages and funeral processions. We have a different system in Ladakh and our culture is similar; dissociation from Ladakhi customs and traditions will make our lives difficult. For that reason, I consider *Kos* (a traditional dress worn by women of both communities) to be the best 'Islamic' dress as it covers the whole body and it's loose.

Others fear that the visible assertion of a minority religious identity may incite antagonism from the majority Buddhist population. In Ladakh, interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims takes place every day, but the practice of wearing Islamic dress creates a culturally alien appearance and implies dissociation from the life of the wider community. Similarly, women who are studying in secular universities outside Leh find it hard to accept the changes within the Muslim community at home. For example, Zarina said:

As I study in Delhi, there is a choice to wear whatever dress I like. It is difficult to wear *hijab*, *burkha*, and *abaya*, which the family or the Muslim community prescribes in Leh.

This sentiment was echoed by Faiza, another informant, who added:

There are multiple interpretations of the Quran and the *hadith*, some of which prescribe the *burkha* while others only prescribe the *hijab*. So, it puts me in dilemma as what to follow. Therefore, I follow an Islam which talks about being good person rather than about [clothing] practices.

Nonetheless, the practice of wearing *abaya*, while still marginal, appears to be gaining greater acceptance, including among non-Muslims. Despite the painful experiences of the first female *madrasa* graduates, Khatoon even went so far as to claim that:

Until now we have not faced any antagonism for asserting our religious identity. In fact, Buddhist people respect us for our dressing style and women's initiatives for inculcating Islamic values among women.

Overall, therefore, my research points to a variety of responses to new Islamic dress codes and the ongoing religious discussions within *makhtab* and *tabliqh*. However, despite opposition from within the community, my interviewees are creating cultural and religious space for the development of autonomous selves through various religious symbols and practices which reveal how deeply their personal and social identities are shaped by their religious experience.

Conclusion

Religion should be understood not only as a set of beliefs and practices, but also as a key determinant in identity formation, which involves power. The present study illustrates the importance of religion as a source of personal and social identity and reveals the ways through which women negotiate their religious identity. Moreover, this research demonstrates that identity formation among Sunni Muslim women in Leh is an ongoing process as in other South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and many other Muslim societies further afield such as Egypt. These phenomena underline the larger global *ummah* (community) connection and the spread of greater Islamic knowledge through technology and as well as first-hand engagement through local religious groups.

The research highlights two important points: first, individual women and groups actively construct their religious identities. Secondly, the research findings indicate that the development of a strong religious identity involves keen introspection, self-awareness, awakening, individual choices, and divergence from the past of similar socio-cultural environment. The increasing religiosity among a certain segment of Muslim women can be attributed to the religious learning that few women acquired outside Ladakh and propagated within Leh which was further augmented after the communal tension of the 1980s. Religious constraints and meanings are constructed both from within and without, in response to internal religious conflicts, choices, and rewards.

There is also a generational shift in taking to this practice. Personal anecdotes as well as inter-generational comparisons in terms of adopting overt markers of identity reflect the self-conscious move of women toward personal and social change. Religion is a tool of empowerment, a source of agency that has helped these women to negotiate their own space. In addition, they spoke of ignorance of 'true' religious doctrine before their exposure to the Islamic principles through *tabliqh*, *majlis*, and the 'true' interpretation of Quran in *makhtab*. Therefore, the self-reflection and

subjective transformation of Muslim women is expressed through Islamic clothing like hijab, *abaya*, and *burkha*. The events that have led up to each woman's decision to wear Islamic clothing varied markedly from individual to individual. Seeing themselves as pioneers in the struggle toward a revitalized society, they refashion themselves to fit their image of Islamic womanhood, thus affirming their group belonging.

As stated earlier, the process of religious identity development presented in this paper does not represent the identity formation process of all Sunni Muslim women. Neither is it likely to be the final phase of what will continue to be a complex process of identity negotiation and evolution for these women. While religious identity is not emphasized by other Muslims to the same extent as these informants, this research nonetheless reveals how religious identities can be constructed, upheld, and decreed by the Sunni Muslim women of Leh. One of my main aims in writing this paper of Leh is to capture and create an account that has not been written by a local or any other scholar from the perspectives I have studied. Nevertheless, it is not a complete research in itself and further analysis can be made of varying degrees of religiosity with difference in women's class, family, education, sect, and other social variables. I hope to carry forward my research on women in Ladakh from different perspectives in my future work.

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Endnotes

1. The Nurbakshi are a small group with a distinctive ideology which is named after Muhammad Nubaksh (d. 1464), a Sufi master belonging to the Kubravi chain of authority (*silsila*) who proclaimed himself the Mahdi, the traditional Muslim messianic figure, in Khuttalan (present-day Tajikistan) in 1423. His successor was Shams ud-Din 'Iraqi who was known to have visited and made converts in the Ladakh and Baltistan region (Bashir 2009).
2. In this study, I use the words 'veil' and *burkha* interchangeably. Ladakhi Muslims consider the *hijab* to be a distinct garment, but in studies like Bartkowski and Read (2003), *hijab* and veiling are used interchangeably.
3. The *Aalim* course is equivalent to a B.A. and the *Fazil* course is equivalent to an M.A. in Arabic.
4. The traditional garment of Muslim women consisting of a long usually black or drab-colored cloth or veil that envelops the body from head to foot and covers all or part of the face.

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