
Islamist Terrorism and ‘Feminist’ Narratives: The Case of Dukhtaran-e-Millat

Introduction

At the signing Ceremony for Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001, just a few months into the US-led invasion in Afghanistan, United States (US) President George Bush Jr. flawlessly encapsulated the manner in which an agenda of women’s rights has become co-opted and politicized to - in addition to political and strategic considerations - also morally justify violent intervention in the War on Terror, when he made the following opening remarks, *“The central goal of the terrorists is the brutal oppression of women ... that is the reason this great nation, with our friends and our allies, will not rest until we bring them all to justice”*.

Western discourses surrounding Islam, extremism and that of *“saving the oppressed Muslim woman”* have long been at the heart of US foreign policy whereby this particular narrative has been repeatedly renewed and re-utilized in order to garner widespread support for military interventions. Subsequently, this has reinforced a framework in which women are recognized solely as victims in a series of campaigns of terror engineered by their male counterparts. But if this rhetoric indeed epitomizes the dreadful reality of women under Islamist terror outfits, what transpires when this particular narrative is inherently rebutted by the very women who are meant to be saved?

Discourses on female victimhood and oppression against the backdrop of Islamist militancy have, as a matter of fact, been undermined by the increasingly central role played by women alongside these organizations and political Islamist movements, as exemplified by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Yet, confronted with the endless struggle in determining the appropriate role of women within their ranks, the international arena has witnessed the conception of all-female Islamist extremist groups that are normally hand-in-glove with larger terrorist organizations. While that relationship has recently been embodied by the notorious ISIS’ al-Khansa Brigade, the pioneer in the genre of *‘all-female Islamic terrorism’* was in fact the relatively unknown outfit of Dukhtaran-e-Millat (DeM). Conceived in 1987 in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir, DeM has played a pivotal role in supporting violent religious extremism while simultaneously attempting to refute the Western rhetoric of Muslim women as passive bystanders in the context of Islamist terrorism. Ironically, it is the very notion of women’s agency that DeM deploys in order to legitimize its participation in violence. Cognizant of this, it is therefore pertinent to examine the outfit and its *‘feminist’* discourse in justifying support for terrorist activities. While another all-female separatist group, such as Muslim Khawateen Markaz, had equally taken root in the region, DeM’s intriguing distinctiveness lies in its aggressive manner of engaging in moral policing through

the promotion of gendered narratives. This article provides a brief introduction of Dukhtaran-e-Millat; underlining its genesis, primary objectives, and the manner in which violence is perpetrated and supported in the name of religion and female emancipation. The argument put forward is that while the outfit has professed that it champions women's rights alongside fighting for the accession of Jammu & Kashmir to Pakistan, the promise of emancipation in the name of religious fundamentalism has been but a cruel betrayal for the ordinary Kashmiri woman.

Dukhtaran-e-Millat

Dukhtaran-e-Millat (DeM) – or *Daughters of the Nation* - was founded in 1987 by Asiya Andrabi, - a self-proclaimed “*Islamic feminist*” who has occupied a central role in promoting voices of radical women advocating for ‘*Islamic way*’ of life in Kashmir. In addition to gaining notoriety as the wife of Ashiq Hussain Faktoo – militant commander turned Hurriyat leader, currently imprisoned and convicted for terrorism and murder charges – Andrabi has indubitably remained the public face of her all-female separatist creation despite its sophisticated organizational structure. As a result of its increasingly visible role in violence, Dukhtaran-e-Millat was banned in 1990 whereinafter Andrabi spent most of the 1990's underground or in detention. Due to links with Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), for disseminating anti-India propaganda, Andrabi has been incarcerated on multiple occasions by India's National Investigation Agency (NIA), most recently in 2018. Despite the physical absence, her outfit continued to thrive before and past the dawn of the millennium; although little certainty pertains to the exact numerical strength of the organization, by late 2006 DeM claimed to have 500 active members in Kashmir. Furthermore, the outfit claimed to possess the sympathy of thousands around the world, notably in Kashmir, Pakistan, the US and Europe. Eventually, in early 2016, the NIA proscribed the DeM as a terrorist organization on the basis of openly supporting banned UN designated Global Terrorist Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, links with the ISI and for being involved in anti-State activities (Naseem, 2017).

Under the leadership of Andrabi, the strategy of Dukhtaran-e-Millat has remained two-fold: to support terrorism and thereby facilitate the accession of Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir to Pakistan, while simultaneously reforming Kashmiri society by advocating and enforcing a radical code of conduct among ordinary citizens, particularly women (Shekhawat, 2014). In its nascent phase, the latter objective was deemed a priority, whereby the group initially surfaced as a reform movement aimed at educating Muslim women about Islam and their rights. By 1988, Andrabi was exerting constant – albeit non-violent – pressure on local authorities as a means to pursue DeM's objectives. The group's demand for social and cultural reform included gender-based segregation in public transport and other places. But when terrorism began to creep through the Valley the following year, Andrabi abandoned the sole mission of reformism and instead turned her energies towards sustaining the extremist movement. With Dukhtaran-e-Millat's gradual shift towards more extremist ideologies, the group began to advocate the cause of *jihad* and imposing draconian diktats - categorized by some as attempts to ‘*Talibanize Kashmir*’ (ibid).

Quest for Social Reform and Support for Terrorism

Naturally, the majority of these diktats were ‘soft’ in nature whereby they subscribed to the centrality of traditional gender roles with women encouraged to remain in the private sphere; the home or in supporting roles. Within academic circles, DeM initially was often categorized as a ‘soft terrorist organization’ insofar as using illegal and coercive measures, including the use of threats, to obtain its objectives. Moral policing - a symbolically imperative task of the outfit - revolves around the targeting of locations supposedly used for “immoral” activities; perhaps most famously, Andrabi is known to have sent “burkha-clad activists to burn Valentine’s Day cards and posters, raid liquor shops, and restraint boasting special seating arrangement for couples” (Parashar, 2011). Enforcing fundamentalist social codes, notably that of gender segregation, also serves another purpose in addition to advocating the “proper” Islamic way of life. By banning various forms of entrainment - with no activities to remind Kashmiris of an ordinary life in the midst of incessant violence - individuals may be more inclined to focus their efforts on activities that are in line with violent agendas – exemplified by stone-pelting.

Unsurprisingly, violence penetrated the processes of moral policing when, at the dawn of the millennium, two Kashmiri women became victims of an acid attack perpetrated by Lashkar-e-Jabbar activists. This deplorable crime, which occurred in Srinagar, took place following the announcement made by the Lashkar-e-Jabbar wherein it would begin to use violence against Kashmiri Muslims who were not dressed in accordance with ‘Islamic Dress Codes’. The Valley of Kashmir, where the veil was a relatively unfamiliar custom, began to suddenly witness vigorous campaigning for the implementation of the veil - at the forefront of Dukhtaran-e-Millat’s mission. Whilst the operation was initially subject to criticism, chiefly due to the region’s deeply engrained historical architecture of liberal Sufism, the adverse impact was noticeable all across the Valley. This change has notably been manifested in a growingly visible trend of Kashmiri women wearing the *burqa* and abiding to strict religious interpretations over permissible clothing. This exposes some of the challenges faced by ordinary Kashmiri women, who find themselves in a binary framework of ‘us versus them’; ‘Good Muslims’ versus ‘Not Good Muslims’ narrative. Caught between the diktats of the fundamentalists and terrorists – claiming to defend the rights of ‘virtuous Muslims’ and against the ‘Non-Muslim’ Indian State and its security forces.

Vociferous in her support for prevailing Islamist terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir, Andrabi has frequently denied claims of DeM engaging in “practical militancy”. Indeed, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that Andrabi or other members of DeM were involved in direct fighting by taking up arms – rather, aiding terrorism came in the form of ideological and logistical support. By maintaining an active presence on a societal level – such as exploiting funerals of killed terrorists in order to instill solidarity and encourage further support for terrorism - DeM has been highly successful in indoctrinating and mobilizing Kashmiri women into accepting rigors of terrorism. Moreover, evidence suggests that DeM has provided logistical support to terrorist organizations – including Lashkar-e-Jabbar (LeJ), Al-Mansoorian, the Jamait-Mujahideen (JuM) and the Hizbul Mujahideen – by acting as couriers of messages, funds, and weapons (ibid). Ironically, Andrabi has been quoted as arguing that Kashmiri

women will resort to direct violence if men withdraw from the armed movement. This stance on combat operations, equally echoed by other DeM members (Shekhawat, 2014), reinforces the all-pervasive patriarchal approach of *'first men and then women'*, wherein women in fact remain passive until the strength of their male counterparts has worn thin.

Islamic Terrorism and Feminist Discourses

But perhaps the most interesting – if not disturbing – characteristic of DeM is the manner in which it deploys the notions of religion and women's rights, and the intersections between the two, as a primary narrative for legitimizing the support for, and direct or indirect participation in terrorist activities. As Seema Shekhawat, author, social scientist and researcher at the University of Central Florida, elucidates:

"The organization, which claimed to aid Kashmiri women to fight for their Islamic rights, used religion to push women to a more regressive order by vigorously campaigning for the implementation of various fundamentalists diktats".

As a self-proclaimed *"Islamic feminist"*, claiming to champion women's rights under the pretext of violent extremism, Andrabi's discourse is tainted with deceit. The rhetoric implies that all Kashmiri women – by virtue of being a *"good Muslim"* - should indirectly engage in violent Islamist terrorism. Employing the *'Muslims'* versus *'non-Muslims'* signifies the undermining and breakdown of any traditional and cultural identities that have been deeply rooted in Kashmir as a result of the more liberal Sufi culture. In lieu of offering a path of empowerment, women are further marginalized as a result of being pushed towards traditional gender roles which are in accordance with extremist religious views.

Contrary to the promise of emancipation, the rhetoric of DeM suggests that only certain forms of femininities – namely that of motherhood – are accepted in order to achieve militant objectives. Relegating women to the private sphere serves the purpose of pursuing and promoting the *'motherhood'* narrative, wherein a woman – ideologically *'banned'* from participating in direct hostilities herself – may be more inclined to support her son in engaging in terrorism. According to this deranged logic, the martyrdom of a male relative becomes a woman's biggest contribution to violent extremism. Again, religion is mobilized to advance the outrageous and inhumane idea that martyrdom enables the individual to embrace the virtue of being a *'good'* Muslim and further promises a *'good place'* in Paradise. As Swati Parashar, Associate Professor in Peace and Development at the School of Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg, explains:

"Many women, whose sons were martyred, did not weep but bought almonds, walnuts, and sweets and threw them on their bodies, saying that the son died for the nation, died for a cause. Many mothers called for celebrations after their sons were martyred".

Praveen Swami, Indian journalist and current National Editor of *The Indian Express*, observes an increasing acceptance vis-à-vis the *jihadist* discourse which has manifested in a societal transformation. Whereas it was not uncommon for parents to deny their son's involvement

in terrorism, the contemporary, radicalized environment even encourages expressing happiness and joy on their son's 'martyrdom'. In a curious development in 2008, mothers who had lost their sons were publicly honored as mothers of martyrs by Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) leader, Yasin Malik. Of all the terrorist groups actively targeting women to expand their support networks for *jihad*, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) weaponizes the 'motherhood narrative' most effectively in its mobilization strategy. Most paradoxically, while motherhood narratives are effectively deployed as part of the public face for political activism and the supporting of terrorism, women's roles are meticulously restricted within the accepted social norms of femininity.

Furthermore, by using national and international platforms in order to advance the untrue and wicked image of Kashmiri women supporting extremist code of conducts and terrorist activities, the reality of women who have suffered immensely as a result of terrorism is easily obscured. Exclusively portraying women as direct and indirect supporters of violence undermines the brutal social and economic losses endured by the majority of women who are caught "between two guns". For instance, in the process of seeking the release of a son who has been accused of participating in terrorism, women are often forced to navigate through the tiring and complex Indian legal system. In the unfortunate event of losing family members and bread earners, women are forced to cope with the financial burdens that may arise from such losses. As such, the narrative advanced by DeM not only exacerbates further marginalization of women, but equally obscures the harsh reality of Kashmiri women who endure the brutal consequences of terrorism.

Conclusion

The promotion of religion and female agency as legitimate narratives to justify moral policing and the support for violent Islamist militarism, is to say the least, drenched in hypocrisy. It is indeed comical, albeit distressing, to examine the position of Andrabi's own children while encouraging Kashmiri women to give up their sons for *Jihad* and celebrate their death as martyrdom. According to newspapers reports quoting the NIA, one of her children enjoys his education in a well-developed South East Asian country and Andrabi has allegedly been diverting Pakistani sponsored remittances meant to propagate DeM activities, to his education. While his future prospects as the captain of his university cricket team are certainly bright, the same cannot be said about the many ordinary young Kashmiris who – indoctrinated by religious extremist ideologies – will be lured in sacrificing their lives for the deceptive allures of terrorism. The absurd glorification of martyrdom not only hijacks any future aspiration of young men, but also bears enormous social and economic ramifications for their female relatives.

Paradoxically, while Dukhtaran-e-Millat publicly claims to advocate for the welfare of women and their rights under Islam, the true quest for attaining female emancipation is ultimately and vehemently sabotaged. Adopting traditional gender roles, thereby subscribing to what is preached by DeM, only serves to exacerbate the marginalization of women; in lieu of

acquiring a voice in the influential public sphere, women are being reinstated into the realm of the private.

While the conflict in Jammu & Kashmir has political and religious dimensions, it is of fundamental importance for Kashmiri women to recognize the existence of alternative paths and solutions that lead to women's empowerment. One such solution is that of increasing women's participation in local political processes – a dismal phenomenon in Kashmir thus far – which can positively contribute to future prospects of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Although arguably the product of political dynastic cultures, one such example is Mehbooba Mufti - President of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) - who served as the first and last female Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir from 2016 until 2018. Not only do her accomplishments as a political figure in a - regrettably - male-dominated field serve as a true inspiration in terms of female political empowerment, but it also resonates with women who are struggling to locate their convictions and place in-between two guns. Although currently detained under the Public Safety Act, her achievements as a woman in a turbulent and violent political climate represent a non-violent and successful alternative to influence decision-making. Naturally, while it would be naïve to overlook the patriarchal structures that largely hinder women from participating in political processes, it is imperative to acknowledge that such opportunities do exist. But in order to realize such prospects, energies should be redirected towards improving access to education and de-radicalization programs, thus enabling women and girls to pursue proper careers instead of falling into the rabbit hole of fundamentalist diktats.

As long as organizations like Dukhtaran-e-Millat continue to vociferate the language of violence and terrorism, the prospect of empowerment of ordinary Kashmiri women and girls finds itself in a distressing state of affairs.

Such empowerment can only commence once the ordinary Kashmiri woman reclaims her centuries-old Sufi-inspired liberal narrative and unequivocally halts organizations like Dukhtaran-e-Millat from advertising themselves as guardians of her religion in general and women's rights in particular.



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