

A harbinger of change for Muslim women in India

One step at a time, a woman from Tamil Nadu is triggering winds of change for Muslim women in India.

Daud Sharifa Khanum is building a mosque, and for that her life is under threat. Hardliners in her community have asked her to give up the effort.

'I am not afraid of death. I am not going to give up ... this is something I want to leave behind for the women of my country in the name of Allah', Sharifa told IANS on the eve of her visit to the US.

The Quran does not stop women from praying in mosques; only society does, pointed out Sharifa, armed with a post-graduate degree in history.

The 17th-century Jama Masjid, India's biggest mosque and located in Delhi, is dedicated to Jahanara, the daughter of Mughal emperor Shahjahan who built the imposing shrine.

Building a mosque is a small and not unusual wish for this 40-year-old Indian woman who has set up an NGO called STEPS that reaches out to distressed women from the country's deep south.

Today, the STEPS office, set up in 1991 in a small house Sharifa built on her land in Pudukottai town, about 450 km south of Chennai, is an umbrella for women from as far away as Ramanathapuram and Nagercoil, many of them victims of dowry, harassment and 'talaq' (divorce), problems that women face the world over, and not just Muslim women.

'But, if you are a minority community woman, neither the government and its law enforcement and rights machinery nor welfare agencies, nor anyone else come to your assistance,' Sharifa says.

During communal violence some years ago in Nagore town, she had raised the issue of abortion as a matter of human rights but received little help even from the authorities.

'I spent 15 days in the relief camps of Gujarat and met victims of sexual assault during the horrendous riots... No feminist group raised this issue. Women have no identity of their own. They are subjected to violence in all communities,' she says.

STEPS has set up a separate organisation for Muslim women's empowerment called 'Saaya'.

'Minority community women got nothing in relief after the December 2004 tsunami,' she says. 'You are doubly burdened if you are a woman and from the minority community.'

'My sisters now support me', she says, and her sisterhood of the emancipated envelopes at least 10,000.

Sharifa is the last child in a family of 10 kids, from Manapparai, near Tiruchirapalli. Her journey began with questions against curbs in a traditional Muslim home. She went on to study at the Aligarh Muslim University.

In February 2004, STEPS set up a 35-member 'jamat' for women. Jamat is a village council,

essentially a tradition handed down through time, as a local body that devotes itself to resolving disputes at the grass-root level and regulates community affairs like festivals.

In an all-male jamat, 'the women can never present their side. Decisions are taken based on the man's version alone... without hearing what the women have to say.'

The idea of a women's 'jamat' faced resistance even from progressive Muslim groups like the Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam (TMMK).

M.H. Jawahirullah, the TMMK president, accepts that women should have the right to pray in mosques. In at least five percent of Tamil Nadu's mosques there are separate enclosures for women.

'But a women's mosque is unacceptable,' he says. Also, 'women cannot be represented in jamats'.

Yet, every day more than 15 petitions relating to marital disputes come to the STEPS jamat, many sent by other jamats in the region. In the last one year, the women's council has resolved 55 cases of family disputes.

The Labbaikudikadu village in Perambalur district is so impressed with STEPS' arguments against dowry that the village has agreed to conduct weddings without dowries.

Another village on the outskirts of Pudukottai donated the land for the mosque. Sharifa even got married because tradition dictates that an unmarried person cannot build a mosque.

The first bricks for the women's mosque have been laid. She needs Rs.3.5 million to complete the building.

'Funds do not come without strings. I want money but money that is completely clean,' she says.

'I wish my mosque could be built in an hour', she says wistfully, 15 years after her journey began.

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