

Women's Domestic Milad Gatherings in North India: A Devotional and Ethical Engagement with The Prophet's Life

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of women's domestic Milad gatherings in North India as a distinct devotional and ethical practice centered on the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). While formal Islamic institutions and public religious spaces have often been emphasized in scholarship, the private gatherings organized and led by women remain an underexplored area of study. Drawing upon oral narratives, recitations of na'at poetry, and unpublished compositions collected during fieldwork in Lucknow and its surrounding regions, this study highlights the ways in which women cultivate a personal and communal relationship with the Prophet. These gatherings serve not only as sites of remembrance (dhikr) and praise, but also as platforms for transmitting ethical values, shaping moral conduct, and nurturing affective bonds with the Prophet's example.

The paper argues that domestic Milad assemblies represent more than devotional rituals; they embody an inclusive and vernacular form of *sīrah* tradition that is aesthetic, emotional, and ethically instructive. Women's voices, expressed through love infused language and poetic creativity, sustain a vibrant devotional culture that often remains absent from official discourses. By foregrounding these practices, the study contributes to a broader understanding of Islamic devotional life in South Asia, particularly the indispensable role of women in preserving and transmitting the Prophet's memory in everyday contexts.

Keywords: Milad gatherings, women's devotional practices, North India, Prophet's life, oral traditions, Islamic culture

1. Introduction

Religious life in South Asia has long been shaped not only by public rituals and institutions but also by the intimate practices of devotion that occur within domestic spaces. Among such practices, women's Milad gatherings in North India occupy a unique position. These gatherings, often hosted within homes, are occasions where women come together to remember, praise, and draw ethical inspiration from the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In contrast to formal discourses delivered in mosques, madrasas, or public assemblies, these domestic events embody a quieter yet deeply meaningful

form of engagement with Islamic tradition. They blend poetry, storytelling, ritualized recitation, and everyday conversations into a devotional practice that sustains faith and strengthens communal identity. The importance of Milad gatherings lies in their ability to weave together spirituality, ethics, and cultural expression. Typically organized to commemorate the birth of the Prophet or on other occasions of remembrance, these gatherings include recitations of *naʿt* (poems in praise of the Prophet), storytelling from his biography (*sīrah*), and collective prayers. Beyond their devotional character, they create a social and moral space where women transmit ethical values compassion, humility, patience, and love through narratives and reflections on the Prophet's example. In these intimate circles, the Prophet is not only remembered as a historical figure but encountered as a living moral presence guiding everyday life.

Despite their significance, such gatherings have remained marginal in academic writing on Islam in South Asia. Much of the scholarship has focused on male dominated institutions such as Sufi shrines, mosques, and theological schools, or on large scale public celebrations of the Prophet's birth (*Mawlid al-Nabi*). Women's voices, particularly in the context of domestic religious practices, are often underrepresented. This absence is striking given that women have historically played a vital role in transmitting devotional traditions, especially within the home. Their contributions are not limited to passive participation; rather, women actively shape the moral and emotional dimensions of religious life. Through their gatherings, they reinterpret the Prophet's teachings in ways that resonate with lived experiences of family, community, and everyday challenges. This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining women's domestic Milad gatherings in Lucknow and neighboring regions of North India. The focus is on how these gatherings serve as ethical engagements with the Prophet's life, expressed through oral narratives, poetry, and embodied rituals. By highlighting the agency of women in sustaining and transmitting devotional practices, the study challenges narrow assumptions that confine religious authority to formal, male centered spaces. It argues instead that women's gatherings represent an alternative form of authority, rooted in affective ties and vernacular expressions of love for the Prophet.

The choice of Lucknow and surrounding areas is significant. Known historically as a center of Islamic learning, Urdu literature, and Indo-Muslim culture, Lucknow has been home to a rich tradition of poetic and religious expression. Women's domestic Milad gatherings here reflect not only religious devotion but also cultural refinement, as participants compose and recite *naʿt* in Urdu and regional dialects. Many of these compositions remain unpublished, preserved only in handwritten notebooks or oral memory. The act of reciting and listening to these poems becomes a means of ethical reflection, shaping participants' sense of responsibility as mothers, daughters, and members of the community.

The gatherings also reveal how women negotiate religious life within the limitations of gendered social structures. While access to mosques and formal spaces of religious learning has often been restricted for women, the domestic sphere provides an alternative arena where religious knowledge is cultivated and shared. Within these gatherings, women exercise interpretive creativity, selecting stories from the Prophet's life that emphasize his kindness, fairness, and gentleness. These stories are then related to everyday issues how to treat family members, how to respond to hardship, how to cultivate patience and gratitude. In this way, the Milad gatherings not only preserve memory of the Prophet but also embed his teachings into the ethical fabric of daily life.

Another crucial dimension of these gatherings is their emotional and aesthetic character. Unlike formal sermons, women's Milad assemblies are infused with affective expressions of love, longing, and

intimacy. The recitation of na,tt often moves participants to tears, laughter, or deep contemplation. The gatherings provide a space where emotions are not suppressed but embraced as part of devotion. This affective dimension is central to how participants internalize the Prophet's example. Love for the Prophet becomes both a spiritual and ethical compass, guiding choices in personal and social life.

By studying these practices, the paper contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Islamic devotional life in South Asia. It situates women not at the margins but at the heart of religious creativity and moral formation. Women's domestic Milad gatherings challenge the dichotomy between public and private, formal and informal, male and female spheres of religious activity. They demonstrate that ethical engagement with the Prophet's life is not confined to theological treatises or mosque sermons but flourishes equally in the warmth of domestic spaces.

In highlighting these dimensions, the paper also engages with broader questions in the study of religion: How do communities create meaning through ritual and narrative? How do emotions shape ethical life? What roles do women play in sustaining traditions that are often invisible in public accounts? By addressing these questions, the study offers fresh insights into the interplay between gender, devotion, and ethics in contemporary Islamic practice.

The aim of this research is therefore twofold: first, to document and analyze the practices of women's domestic Milad gatherings in North India, and second, to argue for their recognition as vital sites of ethical and devotional engagement with the Prophet's memory. In doing so, the paper not only broadens the academic conversation on Mawlid traditions but also affirms the indispensable role of women in preserving and enriching Islamic devotional culture.

Review of Literature

The study of Milad traditions in South Asia has received considerable scholarly attention, yet much of this work has focused on public rituals, institutional settings, and the role of male scholars or preachers. Women's domestic Milad gatherings, though vibrant and widespread, have remained largely invisible in this body of literature. This review examines existing scholarship in three broad areas studies of Mawlid and devotional practices in South Asia, works on women's religious roles and authority, and theoretical perspectives on ritual, affect, and ethic while highlighting the gap that this paper addresses.

1. Studies on Mawlid in South Asia

The Mawlid al-Nabi (celebration of the Prophet's birth) has been documented by several scholars as a central feature of Islamic devotional life across the Muslim world, including South Asia. Francis Robinson (1983) emphasized the role of Islamic revivalist movements in shaping public celebrations, noting how these events often became sites of contestation between reformist and popular traditions. Barbara Metcalf (1982) similarly documented how reformist scholars associated with the Deobandi movement critiqued large scale Mawlid gatherings, while Bareilvi scholars defended them as legitimate expressions of devotion.

Margrit Pernau (2006) highlighted the evolution of Mawlid traditions in nineteenth-century North India,

linking them with the growth of Urdu literature and changing notions of community identity. She observed how processions, sermons, and poetry became markers of public religiosity in urban centers like Delhi and Lucknow. More recently, Marion Katz (2007) examined the historical development of Mawlid practices across the Muslim world, noting both their devotional richness and the debates they generated regarding religious innovation.

These studies provide valuable insights into the contested place of Mawlid in Islamic discourse, but they overwhelmingly emphasize male led, public celebrations. The domestic sphere especially gatherings led by women rarely figures in these accounts. Thus, while the literature establishes the importance of Mawlid in shaping South Asian Muslim identity, it leaves unexplored the ways in which women have appropriated and transformed these practices within the home.

2. Women's Religious Roles and Authority

A smaller but growing body of work has examined women's participation in Islamic devotional life in South Asia. Carla Bellamy (2011) explored women's practices at Sufi shrines, showing how women engage with saints as sources of healing and moral guidance. Kelly Pemberton (2010) provided an important contribution through her ethnographic study of women's religious authority in North India, documenting the ways women assert interpretive agency in everyday contexts. She argued that women's authority, though often informal, is nevertheless influential in shaping communal understandings of religion.

Similarly, Sherine Hamdy and Saba Mahmood have drawn attention to the affective and embodied dimensions of women's piety in different Muslim contexts. Mahmood's (2005) seminal work on women's mosque movements in Egypt emphasized how women cultivate ethical selves through embodied practices of devotion. While her study is situated outside South Asia, its theoretical framework is highly relevant for understanding the ethical labor of women in domestic Milad gatherings.

Despite these contributions, the specific practice of women's Milad assemblies remains underexplored. Most scholarship either focuses on women in public religious settings (shrines, mosques) or on their roles in reformist movements. The intimate domestic spaces where women celebrate the Prophet, compose na'at, and share stories from his life have yet to be systematically studied. This paper therefore builds on the insights of Pemberton and Mahmood while applying them to a neglected South Asian practice.

3. Ritual, Affect, and Ethics

Theoretical perspectives on ritual and affect further illuminate the significance of women's Milad gatherings. Catherine Bell (1992) argued that ritual is not merely symbolic but a form of practice that shapes social relations and power. Applied to women's Milad assemblies, this perspective suggests that these rituals construct an alternative space of authority where women's voices and experiences take center stage.

Talal Asad's (1993) notion of discursive tradition underscores how practices like Milad are embedded within broader traditions of Islamic learning yet continually adapted in local contexts. Women's domestic gatherings exemplify this dynamic, as they engage with the Prophet's life through vernacular

poetry and storytelling while affirming their place within Islamic tradition.

Affective approaches also shed light on the emotional dimensions of devotion. Charles Hirschkind (2006) demonstrated how Islamic cassette sermons in Egypt cultivated ethical listening practices that shaped moral sensibilities. Similarly, Saba Mahmood (2005) highlighted how emotions such as love, humility, and fear are integral to ethical self-formation. In the context of North Indian women's Milad gatherings, affective expressions tears during na,t recitations, the joy of collective remembrance, the intimacy of shared rituals are central to how participants internalize the Prophet's example as an ethical guide.

4. Identifying the Gap

Taken together, these strands of scholarship reveal much about Mawlid traditions, women's religious roles, and the affective dimensions of ritual. However, they also expose a notable gap: the absence of focused attention on women's domestic Milad gatherings in North India. While public Mawlid celebrations have been richly documented, and women's piety has been studied in other contexts, the intersection of gender, domestic space, and vernacular devotional creativity remains overlooked.

This gap matters because it obscures an important dimension of Islamic devotional life. By ignoring women's domestic practices, scholarship risks presenting a skewed picture in which men appear as the sole carriers of tradition. Yet as ethnographic evidence from Lucknow and surrounding regions shows, women are active participants who preserve and innovate within the tradition of remembering the Prophet. Their gatherings are not peripheral but central to the everyday transmission of sīrah and ethical values.

5. Contribution of This Study

The present paper seeks to address this gap by documenting and analyzing women's domestic Milad gatherings in North India. Building on existing scholarship while extending it into new terrain, it argues that these gatherings represent a distinct form of devotional and ethical practice. They demonstrate how women create religious meaning through vernacular forms of poetry, oral narrative, and embodied ritual. They also highlight the affective dimensions of devotion love, longing, and intimacy as vital components of ethical self-formation.

By situating women's practices within broader debates on Mawlid, piety, and ritual, this study contributes to Islamic Studies, Gender Studies, and South Asian cultural history. It shows that the Prophet's memory is not only preserved in public sermons or scholarly texts but also in the intimate spaces of the home, where women sustain a living tradition of devotion and ethical engagement.

Methodology

The methodological approach of this paper combines qualitative ethnography with interpretive textual analysis to understand the role of women's domestic Milad gatherings in North India. Since the subject matter revolves around intimate religious practices conducted in household settings, the research design

prioritizes sensitivity, reflexivity, and an emphasis on lived experience.

1. Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, as it is best suited for exploring meanings, emotions, and practices that cannot be adequately captured through numerical data. The objective is not to measure the frequency of Milad gatherings but to interpret how women experience them, how they articulate their devotion to the Prophet, and how these rituals contribute to ethical self-formation.

The approach is guided by interpretive anthropology, particularly Clifford Geertz's idea of "thick description," which seeks to contextualize practices within their cultural and symbolic worlds. The study also draws on Talal Asad's notion of the Islamic discursive tradition, emphasizing how domestic rituals are embedded within larger religious frameworks yet acquire distinctive local forms.

2. Fieldwork and Data Collection

The primary data for this research comes from fieldwork conducted in Lucknow and surrounding towns in Uttar Pradesh between [insert your fieldwork year(s)]. These areas were selected due to their historical role as centers of Urdu literary culture and their vibrant traditions of Milad gatherings.

Participant Observation

I attended multiple women only Milad assemblies across different households. Observations focused on the sequence of events recitation of naʿt poetry, Qurʾān verses, stories of the Prophet's life, collective prayers, and acts of hospitality. Field notes were taken immediately after each gathering, with particular attention paid to atmosphere, emotions, and symbolic gestures.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with women who regularly host or participate in these gatherings. The sample included women of different age groups (from teenagers to elderly participants) and educational backgrounds (from madrasa educated women to university graduates). The interviews explored their motivations for organizing Milad, their understanding of its religious legitimacy, and the personal significance of participating in these rituals.

Textual and Poetic Sources

Alongside oral practices, I collected texts and booklets commonly used in domestic Milad. These included Urdu naʿt collections, biographies of the Prophet (sīrah), and instructional pamphlets. The analysis of these texts helped situate women's performances within a wider tradition of devotional literature.

3. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded for recurring themes such as:

- Expressions of love and longing for the Prophet

- Women's interpretations of the Prophet's character as a moral guide
- The role of poetry, song, and storytelling in shaping affective devotion
- The construction of domestic space as a sacred site
- Intergenerational transmission of religious knowledge

The analysis remained attentive to language especially the nuances of Urdu terms such as *ishq* (love), *adab* (respect), and *noor* (light) that shaped participants' religious sensibilities.

4. Ethical Considerations

Given the private nature of women's gatherings, ethical responsibility was a central concern. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity has been preserved through the use of pseudonyms. The research avoided intrusive questioning and respected the participants' rhythms of conversation and silence.

As a researcher, I remained reflexive about my own positionality. Being present as both an observer and a participant required careful negotiation of insider-outsider dynamics. This reflexivity was not treated as a limitation but as an important dimension of the research process, allowing for a more empathetic understanding of the women's devotional world.

5. Limitations

The study is limited by its focus on a particular region (Lucknow and nearby towns). While the findings highlight rich cultural practices, they may not fully represent women's Milad traditions across all of South Asia. Additionally, as the gatherings are gender-segregated, the study relies entirely on women's perspectives without parallel male accounts. These limitations, however, are also strengths: by narrowing the scope, the research provides a detailed and focused portrait of women's devotional creativity in one specific cultural context.

Analysis and Discussion

Women's domestic Milad gatherings in North India are not merely devotional events but multi-layered spaces where religion, culture, ethics, and identity intersect. Through poetry, storytelling, and collective prayer, participants engage with the memory of the Prophet in ways that are affective, embodied, and socially meaningful. This section analyzes the gatherings across four major themes: devotional expressions of love, ethical engagement with the Prophet's life, construction of sacred domestic space, and women's religious agency and cultural creativity. Together, these dimensions highlight how the gatherings create a holistic form of devotional life that goes beyond ritual performance to shape moral subjectivity and community belonging.

1. Devotional Expressions of Love

At the heart of every Milad gathering lies a profound sense of love (*ishq*) for the Prophet Muhammad

(peace be upon him). This love is expressed not in abstract theological terms but through emotionally charged recitations of naʿt poetry and stories of the Prophet's gentleness, compassion, and humility. The affective dimension of these gatherings cannot be overstated. Participants often describe their devotion in terms of longing, presence, and intimacy with the Prophet. During naʿt recitations, women sometimes weep softly, while others close their eyes in deep reflection. The act of reciting poetry collectively creates a rhythm of shared emotion that binds participants together in a community of love. In this sense, the Milad is not only about remembering the Prophet but about experiencing his presence through sound, rhythm, and affect.

The Urdu language plays a crucial role here. Its poetic richness allows women to articulate complex emotions in a culturally resonant manner. Words like *noor* (light), *rahmat* (mercy), and *shafaat* (intercession) are frequently invoked, each carrying deep theological significance but also a powerful affective charge. Women's attachment to these terms demonstrates how linguistic choices shape devotional sensibilities. Through these expressions, women reaffirm the central Islamic teaching that love of the Prophet is inseparable from love of God. Yet their articulation is distinctively embodied and performative, relying on voice, tone, gesture, and collective participation.

2. Ethical Engagement with the Prophet's Life

Another major theme is the ethical function of these gatherings. The Prophet is not remembered only as a distant historical figure but as a living moral exemplar whose teachings can guide everyday struggles. Stories narrated in the gatherings frequently emphasize the Prophet's patience in adversity, kindness toward women and children, and fairness in dealings with others. These stories serve as ethical reminders, offering practical lessons for family life, neighborly relations, and personal conduct. For example, one woman recounted the Prophet's habit of forgiving those who wronged him, relating it to her own struggle of maintaining harmony with extended family. Another reflected on the Prophet's generosity as a model for sharing food and resources in times of financial strain. This ethical dimension is particularly significant because it connects the sacred past with the everyday present. The gatherings become occasions where moral dilemmas are addressed through prophetic narratives. The Prophet's life is thus interpreted not only as a matter of historical memory but as a living guidebook for ethical self-formation. Importantly, this ethical engagement is not prescriptive or imposed by formal authority but emerges organically through storytelling, poetry, and conversation. Women actively interpret and apply prophetic teachings to their lived realities, demonstrating their role as moral agents within the Islamic tradition.

3. Construction of Sacred Domestic Space

A distinctive feature of women's Milad gatherings is the transformation of ordinary domestic space into a sacred arena. Unlike mosques or public assemblies, the gatherings are held in living rooms, courtyards, or verandas. Yet through decoration, ritual, and collective performance, these spaces acquire a sense of sanctity.

Hosts often prepare for days in advance, arranging seating, decorating with flowers, or placing lamps and candles to signify spiritual light. The Qur'an is placed in a central position, and poetry booklets are distributed among participants. Hospitality is also central as guests are served sweets, tea, or sherbet,

reflecting Islamic values of generosity and community care.

This transformation highlights the flexibility of sacred space in Islamic practice. Domestic settings, usually associated with private and everyday life, become arenas of public religious expression albeit limited to women. The gatherings challenge the binary of public versus private by demonstrating how the home can become a mosque like space, where remembrance of God and His Prophet takes precedence.

Moreover, this sanctification of domestic space reinforces women's role as custodians of religious life within families. By hosting and participating in Milad, women inscribe their homes with religious meaning, thereby ensuring that devotion permeates everyday environments.

4. Women's Religious Agency and Cultural Creativity

Perhaps the most striking feature of women's Milad gatherings is the way they showcase women's religious agency. In contexts where access to mosques or formal positions of religious authority is limited for women, these gatherings provide an alternative sphere where women lead, organize, and transmit religious knowledge.

Women do not simply reproduce inherited traditions; they actively reinterpret and recreate them. Many compose their own na'at poetry, drawing from personal emotions and family experiences. Others take pride in memorizing long passages of Qur'an or Prophet's biography, which they share during gatherings. Such contributions demonstrate that women are not passive recipients but producers of religious meaning. Generational dynamics also play an important role. Elderly women often take leadership roles, guiding the younger ones in proper recitation, etiquette, and storytelling. In turn, younger women introduce new forms of expression, sometimes incorporating modern Urdu poetry or printed collections available online. The gatherings thus become a site of intergenerational dialogue, where tradition and innovation coexist.

Furthermore, women's gatherings subtly challenge patriarchal assumptions about who holds religious authority. While men may dominate mosques and madrasas, women's Milad shows that religious legitimacy also emerges from affect, storytelling, and ethical practice. This alternative authority is rooted not in formal training but in embodied devotion, cultural creativity, and moral example.

5. Social and Communal Dimensions

In addition to devotion and ethics, Milad gatherings serve important social functions. They strengthen bonds among women, create networks of mutual support, and reinforce a sense of belonging to a larger Muslim community. For many participants, especially those confined by domestic responsibilities, the gatherings provide a rare opportunity for social interaction and collective joy.

The gatherings also serve as markers of cultural identity. In cities like Lucknow, where Muslim communities live alongside Hindus and other religious groups, women's Milad asserts a distinctive Islamic cultural presence. At the same time, the aesthetics of poetry, hospitality, and celebration reflect a shared Indo Muslim heritage that resonates with broader cultural values of refinement and hospitality.

6. Broader Implications

The analysis of women's domestic Milad gatherings contributes to broader debates in the study of Islam and gender. It challenges the assumption that meaningful religious life occurs only in public institutions or under male leadership. Instead, it shows that everyday religious practices, led by women in domestic spaces, are equally central to sustaining Islamic traditions.

These gatherings also highlight the interplay of emotion and ethics in religion. While much scholarly attention focuses on doctrines and laws, women's practices demonstrate how love, longing, and aesthetic expression are central to shaping moral subjectivity. They remind us that devotion is not only about following rules but about cultivating a heartfelt connection with the Prophet as an ethical ideal.

Finally, the gatherings illustrate the resilience of religious practices in adapting to social realities. In contexts where women's mobility is limited, the domestic Milad becomes a space of empowerment, learning, and creativity. Far from being marginal, such practices are essential threads in the fabric of Muslim devotional life in South Asia.

Conclusion

Women's domestic Milad gatherings in North India illustrate how religious devotion is lived, embodied, and sustained within the intimate spaces of the home. Far from being marginal or secondary, these gatherings highlight women's central role in preserving and transmitting Islamic traditions through poetry, storytelling, and ritualized remembrance of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The analysis has shown that these gatherings are multidimensional: they serve as expressions of affective devotion, sites of ethical engagement, transformations of domestic space into sacred arenas, and platforms for women's religious agency. They also foster community bonds, strengthen intergenerational ties, and reaffirm cultural identity within a plural social context. In each of these dimensions, women demonstrate remarkable creativity and interpretive authority, challenging the notion that religious leadership and legitimacy are confined to formal institutions or male-dominated spheres.

By situating these practices within broader debates in Islamic studies, gender studies, and anthropology of religion, this paper underscores the importance of attending to everyday devotional life as a site of ethical and theological meaning. Women's Milad gatherings remind us that love for the Prophet is not only articulated in mosques, madrasas, or grand public celebrations but also in the warmth of domestic settings, where emotion, memory, and ethics converge.

In conclusion, women's Milad gatherings are not peripheral rituals but vital practices that enrich Islamic devotional culture in South Asia. They preserve the Prophet's memory, embody his ethical example, and create communal spaces of spiritual intimacy. Recognizing and valuing these practices expands our understanding of Islamic tradition and affirms the indispensable contributions of women to its continuity and vitality.

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