



Among The Believers Discussion Guide

Director: Mohammed Naqvi, Hemal Trivedi
Year: 2015
Time: 84 min

You might know this director from:

This is the debut feature film from this directorial team. You may know Mohammed Naqvi from:
Insha'Allah Democracy (2017)
Pakistan's Hidden Shame (2014)
Shame (2006)

FILM SUMMARY

Most schools are created with the intention of helping children gain a historical perspective on the world, the skills to think critically, and the ability to problem solve through the traditional curriculum of math, science, history, and art, but this is not the case for the madrassa educational system set up by Pakistan's Red Mosque. Within the Red Mosque's austere facilities, its students' education consists of memorizing the Quran in toto without training on interpreting the text, and that in exchange for doing so, they and their family members will be granted access to heaven. The resultant student body, most of whom were sent by their families under the impression that they would gain an education and a greater chance at success in life, is a brainwashed group of religious extremists who denounce everything from American ideals to television and the internet as the products of satan.

Hemal Trivedi and Mohammed Naqvi's miraculous **AMONG THE BELIEVERS** grants us unbelievable access to the schools, its students, and the fanatical, highly controversial man at the heart of the Red Mosque's operations, Maulana Mohammad Abdul Aziz. A self-proclaimed supporter of ISIS, Abdul Aziz appears before the camera, wholly confident in his belief that one's complete submission to his version of the teachings of Islam and one's observance of Sharia law is the only way to live one's life.

Importantly, the film is not just a disturbing portrait of extremist ideology. **AMONG THE BELIEVERS** delves into Pakistan's fractured social and political systems, shedding light on why struggling rural families, many of whom are not particularly religious themselves, would send their children to ideologically questionable institutions that brainwash rather than educate its students. Seething with quiet rage at the systemic injustices marshalled against these unfortunate Pakistani kids, this is a film of remarkable insight that banks on its own ability to incite future change, for the sake of the future's youth.

FILM THEMES

Hemal Trivedi and Mohammed Naqvi's *AMONG THE BELIEVERS* reveals the Pakistani educational system to be a fractured institution that's been overtaken by religious extremism.

A MADRASSA EDUCATION OR NOTHING

Options for getting an education in rural Pakistan are little to nil. Public education has broken down at a systemic level, causing many families seeking to send their children to school to resort to a madrasa education like those provided by the Red Mosque, where students are housed and fed completely free of charge to their families. Tragically, many parents, often overburdened by a surplus of children at home, don't know the difference between a public education and a madrasa education, and thus blindly accept the option to send one or more of their children away.

TEACHING OR BRAINWASHING?

In lieu of a formal education consisting of history, math, science, and the arts, children are taught that memorizing the Quran, verse by verse, is their sole task. The meaning of this sacred text is left veiled in shadow, unnecessary for the pursuit of rote memorization. By extension, living by the text itself becomes a necessity, and spreading an extremist variation of Islam to the greater world becomes the inevitable. The schools' administrators and teachers openly admit that they target the young, knowing that by drilling these beliefs into the heads of those at this most impressionable age will solidify this ideology for the rest of their lives.

SHARIA LAW AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

The students of the Red Mosque are taught that Sharia law was written by God himself, and therefore stands as a perfect code for living. Seemingly any influence from the outside world, especially from the United States, is perceived as satanic. Women must wear burqas in the presence of men at all times. Television, music, and computers are all seen as products of satan created to pervert Pakistani culture and divert its people from the study of the Quran. Such teachings have created a tenuous cultural divide on a national scale and has led to religious extremism, and in many cases, horrific eruptions of violence, as in the case of the massacre of 141 people in a school in Peshawar.

POVERTY IN PAKISTAN

Much of Pakistan's population is made up of general laborers who live hand to mouth, working arid land for their daily bread. In this patriarchal society, men are generally expected to bring in the large majority of a household's income, while women stay home to tend to domestic duties. While many families send their children away to madrasa educational institutions like the Red Mosque to lighten their fiscal burdens, another Pakistani custom is to sell one's daughter into marriage in exchange for a substantial dowry. This precedent was highlighted in a recent study that showed that 24 percent of women in the country were married before the age of 18 years in the country between 2000 and 2010 with 7 percent married before they reached the age of 15 years.

“We train our students very differently from regular schools and colleges. We teach our students to work hard, proselytize and wage jihad.”

Maulana Mohammad Abdul Aziz

“Look at the sacrifices of the Red Mosque. If you dare enter here, we will wage jihad. You cannot conquer us. You cannot.”

Anonymous Red Mosque Student

FILM FACTS:

- Hemal Trivedi and Mohammed Naqvi's **AMONG THE BELIEVERS** had its world premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival on April 17, 2015. The film went on to have a successful run on the festival circuit, screening at AFI Docs Festival, International Documentary Festival Amsterdam, Sarajevo Film Festival, and CPH:DOX, where it won the F:ACT Award "for its ability to show us a country with a complex political situation, for unprecedented access to part of its educational system with far reaching consequences and to the dedication the filmmakers have shown in the following the story."
- Following its festival run, **AMONG THE BELIEVERS** was nominated for the Spotlight Award at the Cinema Eye Honors, the Truer Than Fiction Award at the Film Independent Spirit Awards, and an Emmy in the Outstanding Politics and Government Documentary category at the News & Documentary Emmy Awards.
- The film began as a personal investigation after a friend of Trivedi was killed in a terror attack carried out by Islamic militants. Trivedi [explained](#), "After the attacks, my heart was full of anger and hate for the perpetrators of the crime, who were found to be Pakistanis. To make sense of my anger, I started digging deeper into the root causes of these attacks. I came to understand that ordinary Pakistanis are themselves victims of this violence, rather than perpetrators."
- In 2016, **AMONG THE BELIEVERS** director Hemal Trivedi was invited to give a Ted Talk demonstrating how intolerance in any society is a recipe for disaster, especially for children. As proof, she offered the fact that over a 1000 schools have been destroyed by fundamentalist forces in Pakistan since 2010.
- Abdul Aziz is a Pakistani cleric in the Red Mosque of Islamabad, which is also known as Lal Masjid. The son of Muhammad Abdullah, the first prayer leader of the Red Mosque, Aziz possesses massive public support within Islamabad, which has led to several conflicts with the Pakistani government. In the past he has openly shown support of the Taliban and ISIS.
- In January 2016, Abdul Aziz and the Red Mosque began publicly advocating for the imposition of Sharia law and openly called for the overthrow of the Pakistani government, resulting in violent demonstrations, destruction of property, kidnapping, arson, and armed clashes with the authorities. In July of 2017, the Red Mosque complex in Islamabad was besieged, resulting in failed negotiations between the extremists and the state, and a military raid that resulted in 154 deaths and the capture of 50 militants.
- While there are approximately 19,500,000 children of primary school age, 5,400,000 of these kids remain out of school.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Donate** to the [Malala Fund: Pakistan](#). The program invests in girls' education in Pakistan through increasing enrollment for girls at secondary schools, repairing damaged classrooms, providing supplies, and establishing educational programs.
2. **Become** a partner of [Educate A Child](#). They seek people who can help to accelerate the identification, enrollment, and completion of a quality primary education for a significant number of out of school children in war-torn countries around the world.
3. **Work** with the [World Bank](#). The international organization invests in humanitarian efforts around the globe, [including](#) schools in rural Pakistan.
4. **Speak out!** Share stories like that of [UNICEF](#), which works with the Federal Ministry of Education, Provincial Education Departments, International NGOs, NGOs, and other UN agencies to ensure that every girl and boy completes a quality primary education.

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.