The Curious Case of the Indian Muslim: Assessing Significance of Physical Spaces in the (re) Definition of Identity

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The Indian Muslim's identity has been in an unprecedented flux ever since the country was wrecked by the violence of partition. The history of Muslim's existence in India, since partition, is pockmarked with events of communal violence. The violence has been of all kinds: social, political, physical as well as verbal, but what binds all of these is the common method in the madness of violence. This method makes the possibility of its reoccurrence more severe, and this possibility has nearly always been turned into actuality. Muslims who have faced physical violence or have watched it closely, naturally redefined themselves post it, some in order to cope with it, others to save themselves from it in future, still others as a means of retaliation. But even those Muslims who are spatially and/or temporally removed from violence tend to redefine themselves in India with each episode of violence. This paper looks at contemporary Indian Muslims and their history post the Babri Masjid demolition through some major episodes of physical violence that lead to their re-definitions. These include Mumbai 1992-93, Gujarat 2002, and the violence that erupted from the fiasco of the *Babri-Masjid-Ramjanmbhoomi* case in 1992. These episodes did in no way alter the lives of just the people of Ayodhya, Mumbai, or Gujarat, but Muslims all over India were pushed behind new borders and into newer margins. Muslims, as a result, related to the violence despite their distance from it, due to the symbolic nature of this violence. The perpetrators ensured that these attacks were clear as attacks on the entire community even when only a certain section was actually physically affected.

It has been firmly established that an individual is the subject of several overlapping identities; this research paper looks at the factors that have led to religious identity taking precedence over all others. In an atmosphere of growing communalism, and owing to perpetual alienation of a religious community, individuals who affiliate themselves with the given community, are identified as members of that group and also, in turn, begin to define themselves in terms of their communal identity. Group identities seem to be formed through and exist within over-arching narratives that *employ* events lived through post-memory. Despite regional, class, and caste differences, the violence faced by Muslims has led them to feel connected as a community on the basis of their shared religious identity.

I talk of the Indian Muslim as part of a group, the identity of which is a

culmination of a common narrative. This paper analyses how physical spaces seem to be an inextricable part of the Indian Muslim's identity. In Saeed Naqvi's memoir, we see how the physical spaces on India's map were proof of the country's syncretism before the partition. As the discord grew, segregation of physical spaces became the most pronounced markers of ethnic strife. Naqvi explains how the conflict in Ayodhya was "not (between) two belief systems . . . but rather the use of religion to expand territories". What Naqvi says next highlights the question of status and class, which is gradually situating itself at the core of the Indian Muslim's identity. "It (the Ayodhya Conflict) was about status (and) as far as the Indian Muslim was concerned, it was status reversal all the way" (1). Muslims in India are especially the heirs to a division of land and reminders of a boundary on the map. With the gradual rise of Hindu Nationalism, which is founded on the Otherisation of Muslims, territories have become ever more important. Ashutosh Varshney talks of the "two simultaneous impulses" of "Hindu nationalism" which are "a commitment to the *territorial* integrity of India . . . (besides) a political commitment to Hinduism" (228).

Ever since partition, the Indian Muslim has been forced to redefine not just himself, but the spaces he inhabits. Arundhati Roy's *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is a novel situated in Old Delhi, an area which is unmistakably Muslim. Roy traces the trajectories of her characters lives within the confines of the old city, and we can see how religious identity is intertwined with life in the walled city. Roy remarks in her novel how some people viewed these areas "with a tinge of relief that Delhi's Muslim population seemed content enough in its vibrant ghetto. Still, others viewed them as proof that Muslims did not wish to 'integrate' and were very busy breeding and organising themselves, and would soon become a threat to Hindu-India" (14). Roy's commentary on the condition of Shahjahanabad, the 'Muslim-area', and how it is viewed by the 'outsiders' can be extended to segregated Muslim colonies all over India. All these colonies are similarly called 'Pakistan' by these 'outsiders'. The Muslim in India is taunted to be a Pakistani and all areas he inhabits are symbolically pushed across the border. Rowena Robinson brings to light a shocking revelation that highlights the ingrained nature of this Pakistan-*phobia.* She writes how she heard people in North India referring to toilets as 'Pakistan'. Pakistan has been established as a hate-worthy symbol and associating the members of a community with it leads to a "brutal communal discourse" in which all Indian Muslims are Pakistanis (13).

Almost every scholar or writer who enters the discursive space of the Indian Muslim's identity also enters the issue of physical spaces. Being called Pakistan, Muslim spaces are perennially haunted by the ghost of partition that ensures that the Indian Muslim never forgets what he has inherited. Rakshanda

Jalil in her memoir, *But You Don't Look like a Muslim* (2019), dedicates an entire chapter to the area she lives in. Certainly, she must have felt it central to her identity as an Indian Muslim. Jalil writes, "living in the Jamia neighbourhood has always been tough . . . an exercise in fortitude." Though not attempting to distinguish between a ghetto and an ethnic enclave, something that this research will conclusively answer after a detailed analysis, Jalil laments how "coping with a ghettoisation that is not entirely of one's own choice is no easy matter" (8).

This paper analyses and bases its observations on two surveys done to access spaces segregated on communal lines. One was done by Rowena Robinson and published in 2005 while the other was published in 2013 by Nida Kirmani. The dates of the two books and the surveys entailed are used here to exhibit their contemporaneity and to realise how the time-gap would be beneficial to study how violence affects people who are temporally distanced from it and those who have it fresh in their minds.

Robinson's research assesses "the physical re-organization of urban spaces that has altered Mumbai in the years after 1992-93 and . . . other cities such as Baroda and Ahmedabad sites in 2002, of orchestrated attacks on Muslims" (39). While people directly hit by violence are bound to redefine their habitat and shift residence, in the survey by Nida Kirmani, we see how people far removed from violence also shifted and redefined boundaries. While Muslims have continuously been pushed to the margins, there now also seems to be a voluntary distancing from the mainstream. The growing alienation has led to the creation of defence mechanisms, which rarely works in anyone's favour.

Robinson, in her survey of post-violence Gujarat, studies "the brutal and tragic re-organisations of self, community, the material world, social and physical space that are the outcome of communal riots and other forms of violent group engagements" (19) and ". . . enquire(s) into how Muslim victims and survivors reconstruct their modes of being brutalised by actual and symbolic violence" (22). Robinson's research reveals that the Muslim victims of violence not only moulded their outward symbols and structures of existence but also re-structured their beliefs. Tragic as it is, a heterogeneous mass of different individuals is united by a thread of violence. Veena Das questions, "How does one render the relation between possibility and actuality; and further, between the actual and the eventual?" (59). This gap between the possibility of the eventual and the actuality of it is where group identities are formulated post-violence. While some are redefining themselves due to actual violence, others do it due to the eventual violence that has a growing possibility of occurring due to several factors. It is a question of post-memory that finds mention in Kirmani's work when she talks to residents redefining themselves in response to violence that

they had not themselves experienced but only heard of. Kirmani, taking from Das, writes how post-memory functions through stories and experiences of violent events that are passed on from one generation to the next. We see how these events are *employed* in the narrative of the Indian Muslims that leads to a further concretisation of their group identity. According to Kirmani, these narratives are what lead to the "necessity of living in a Muslim locality, thus contributing to the construction of shared insecurity and identity — both of which were mutually constitutive" (85).

It is all a result of the formation of a narrative that starts at different points in time for different people but connects each of them to an overarching structure. No Muslim in India (or elsewhere) exists in political isolation, and therefore it is easier to put them all in one category, that of the Indian Muslim, due to an inevitable awareness of their religious identity. A growing sense of community is also being felt as violent events at the international level are also becoming part of the Indian Muslim's narrative. Margaret R. Somers talks about the narrative construction of identity in her *The Narrative Constitution of Identity* (1994). She says that several scholars have established the argument that all individuals "come to *be*, who [they] are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating [themselves] (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*" (606). Somers' idea of 'casual employment' is also referred to by Robinson, who says writes it is "useful . . . in understanding how particular events are converted into episodes in the narration of group identities". This comes to light in the descriptions of violence in the stories of people Robinson talks to. These individuals who have seen violence up close and personally relate these episodes in different ways, thereby constructing differing narratives that reformulate their identities. For the construction of the Indian Muslim's identity, these "particular events" are events of violence that Muslims as a minority have been subjected to overtime. Robinson's survey tries to answer several questions: one of the most important of them is how a community that is 'Othered' defines itself in relation to those it is 'Othered' by. It is similar to the imperial dilemma where *colonies* forever struggle to redefine themselves to rise out of their Eurocentric plight but rarely do they succeed in creating an identity that is not relational to the Imperial power. Or how women struggle not to define themselves in terms of men while fighting against patriarchy. The story is the same for all Others. How Muslims redefine themselves other than as not-Hindu because this is how they are described in the dominant discourse that leads to their Otherisation.

Besides this, Robinson also highlights the difference between how men and women recount the violence, how they redefine themselves, and how differently they formulate their narratives. She concludes that the narratives of

the male survivors of violence operate in a larger political space and construct the "image of a community injured and attacked by others and by the State," whereas the women counterparts of these men view the same violence more *domestically* (34). What Robinson perhaps fails to realise or highlight, due to an inescapable limitation of the survey, is that such distinctions between male and female outlook are also the result of class distinctions. Robinson surveys mostly the lower and lower-middleclass Muslims in areas rendered unstable by violence. The kind of difference in outlooks of men and women seems more to do with the degree of political awareness where men are more aware because of the public spaces they traverse in and women are secluded in the private sphere. The violence affects women personally because that is the scale they see it being operated at, while men are (made) aware of the larger scale. This is also the reason why fewer women from this section would seek to redefine any fundamentals of their identity. To state it more clearly, people who are politically unaware, in this case women, are unable to see the symbolism of the violence they are faced with. They see the violence as not one in a chain of events but as an outstanding event, which they also think could have been avoided at their personal level. Tabassum Appa is a woman Robinson interviews who lost her child in an event of communal violence, and in whose narration we see this narrow view of communal violence. Robinson writes that in her survey, she came across several individuals who failed to "place their losses within the framework of the overall violence that engulfed their city" (62). Tabassum Appa is one such person who views this violence only in the limited scope of her losing her son in it. Robinson calls this "domestication" of narrative for the reason that it is the domestic space within which it is viewed and placed, while the violence's true overall effect exists in oblivion for these individuals.

Areas affected directly by violence, like those surveyed by Robinson, show an involuntary and forced segregation of spaces. People who could not afford to shift the base of their homes and work-space were forcibly made refugees in other parts of their cities. Here we also see how voluntary segregation, to ensure safety, can act out as a tragic privilege, examples of which we see in Kirmani's survey of Zakir Nagar. Robinson talks of unmistakably Muslim pockets in Ahmedabad, some of which were created in the aftermath of the Gujarat violence, while others that existed before were made more prominent. Talking about Ahmedabad and Baroda, Robinson writes, "in both cities, Muslim *mohallas* could be readily identified. Practically every episode of violence . . . worked to make the spatial boundaries between Hindus and Muslims a little sharper." The segregation following violence is always methodical as several factors make sure the persecuted class is unable to return in any form, material or symbol. Robinson talks about Juhapura, a Muslim mohalla in Ahmedabad that saw an influx of Muslims from even elite

neighbourhoods. Gradually, real estate prices of these areas also increased and measures were taken to ensure that these areas remained "closed to Muslims, regardless of class" (48).

It is worth noting that even though all classes are severely attacked, the lower class is the worst affected. For many, the violence costs life as well as livelihood. It is pertinent for the discussion to produce two instances of working-class men from Robinson's research here as evidence of the systematic segregation and the existence of extremely clear-cut boundaries between areas designated as Hindu and Muslim. One instance involved a man in a wheelchair who used to repair cigarette lighters in the segregated area of *Bapu Nagar*. This person recounted to Robinson how he was once threatened by some Hindus and told to steer clear of this 'border area' (47).

The other instance is of an auto rickshaw driver who ferried a passenger to the Gurukul area. Gurukul is one of the colonies that was completely closed off to Muslims after the carnage of 2002. It lies west to the river Sabarmati which Robinson calls a "symbolic divide for areas designated 'Muslim' or 'Hindu' (48-49). Once the auto-rickshaw driver set-down a passenger, he was told, "*Abhi Musalmaan ka pul ke is paar koi kaam nahi hai* [Now Muslims do not have any excuse to be on this (western) side of the Sabarmati]" (49).

These instances highlight the untraversable boundaries resembling the border between India and Pakistan that have been created between Muslim and Non-Muslim areas in States stricken by communal violence. There are several Muslim ghettos in all cities and villages of India, but each treats its residents differently. For instance, the ghettos formed post-violence in Ahmedabad, Baroda, and Mumbai seemed to shackle those who were forced to reside within it. They were not allowed to leave even if they wanted to and in no way did these ghettos accord any security to the residents. They, in fact, heightened the chances of being attacked as clustered in one place; it was easier for perpetrators to trigger any sort of violence without fear of harming any of their own community members. On the other hand, areas such as Jamia Nagar in New Delhi, which was surveyed by Kirmani, foreground the questions of choice and security. In Kirmani's research, almost all the residents questioned cited security as the primary reason for their 'choice' to reside in these areas. Though Jamia Nagar and various Muslim-areas within it, like Zakir Nagar, Batla House, and Okhla, are usually termed ghettos, it seems to be wrongful labelling; the key issue being of 'choice' here. Kirmani calls areas of Jamia Nagar 'ethnic-enclaves'. Her distinguishing definition arises from Peter Marcuse's definitions of an ethnic enclave and a ghetto. According to Marcuse, a 'ghetto' is different from an 'ethnic enclave' on the basis of 'choice'. Where 'ghetto' is an area of spatial concentration that is deliberately used by dominant

forces to separate a particular population that is categorised as inferior based on ethnic or racial characteristics . . . [an] 'ethnic enclave', [is] where people *choose* to congregate 'as a means of protecting and enhancing their economic, social, political, and/or cultural development' (62).

This distinction is clearly visible in the areas that Robinson and Kirmani survey. While Robinson traverses Muslim ghettos in areas directly stricken by communal violence, Kirmani moves through the ethnic enclavesof Jamia Nagar. The residents' narratives are a testimony to the degree of choice that is accorded to them due to the different kinds of segregated areas they inhabit. However, the question we need to ask is, how much of it is a choice if the people choosing to congregate in such ethnic enclaves see no other option to ensure their safety. There are undoubtedly several differences between direct victims of violence and those muslims who take decisions as a result of their knowledge of the violence of which there is only a plausibility of it occurring for them. The actuality and possibility of violence lead to a similar segregation of spaces between Hindus and Muslims, and yet the re-definitions are different for residents of both these spaces. While the dominant trope in the narrative of residents of ghettos is their helplessness at not being able to return to their earlier habitats, residents of ethnic enclaves are focused on how their areas could be made better for residence as they usually have no intentions to leave it but are bothered by the lack of amenities. Jalil writes in her memoir while contemplating why Muslims "come in droves to live in some of these over-congested, ill-equipped localities". She says, "A great many muslims no doubt prefer to live in Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods of Shaheen Bagh, Gaffar Manzil, Noor Nagar, Zakir Nagar, Batla House, Abul Fazal Enclave, et al for reasons of '*security*', many I suspect, do so because they are left with no *choice*" (emphasis added, 11).

Robinson mentions an instance which makes clear how the retaliatory tactics of those living in Muslim ghettos in violence-stricken areas comprise of attempts to reclaim their spaces outside their margins. Continuously pushed behind boundaries, the fear of being attacked exists but is combated with courage taking over the persecuted community. When rock bottom is hit, the process of rising up begins. Robinson talks about a Muslim activist, who is one of many who refuse to accept the polarisation of spaces. The activist told Robinson how one of the forms of their protests is to occupy the spaces they are not allowed in. They put up protests in areas that they are almost debarred from entering. They say that if they do not do this, they will soon be "forced to remain inside (their) houses. Not able to go out at all. *We have to confront them in those very spaces"* (Kirmani 50, emphasis added).

Creation of ghettos in India leads to the formation of a vicious cycle of

depriving Muslims their fundamental rights and privileges and then feeding into the same stereotypes that lead to their Otherisation in the first place. Robinson and Kirmani, both note in the surveys of their respective areas how Muslim ghettos and ethnic enclaves are markedly different from other areas due to the lack of basic civil amenities. Robinson notes how "such conditions feed continuously into popular images of Muslims as dirty and unhygienic and, in more ways than one, therefore, dispensable" (51).

The distinction is so acute that these deprived colonies could exist at the border of various posh colonies and yet be extended with no benefits that the elite colonies enjoy. Robinson says that even though all slums are more or less similarly deprived, Muslim ghettos are even more deprived than spaces occupied by "Dalits and the mass of the urban poor" (50). Kirmani notes how ". . . New Friends Colony is quite clearly separated from Zakir Nagar . . . (and how this) speaks to the conflation of religion and class in the creation of socio-spatial divisions and the privileging of religion as a marker of difference" (35). New Friends Colony is an area that offers residence to not just non-Muslims, but also only those who belong to the elite, upper-middle-class. Issues of religion and class, therefore, often overlap when segregation of spaces is analysed. The contrast between such areas as New Friends Colony and Zakir Nagar, while it should not, still appears surprising to many. Kirmani quotes one of the residents of Zakir Nagar lamenting this (un)usual contrast. "We never imagined that Zakir Nagar would become like this, that it would become like Old Delhi. Because it was adjacent to New Friends Colony, we thought it would be like that, that kind of crowd, but now look at the contrast (Sadaf, 31 December 2004)" (Kirmani 46-47).

For Muslims attempting to move up the social ladder in Zakir Nagar would mean shifting residence to New Friends Colony. This privilege of attempt is accorded to the residents of a Muslim ethnic-enclave, but not to those of a ghetto like Juhapura in Ahmedabad. Though class distinctions exist within the Muslim community, each member of this community is 'Muslim enough' to be at the receiving end of 'suspicion and mistrust'. It is not an unknown fact that most colonies are unofficially out of bounds for the Indian Muslim. Personal experiences of individual Muslims can well be called universal. To recount Jalil's attempts at finding a home to live in a *non-M*uslim colony near her workplace that uncovered the great divide that had crept into Indian Society. Jalil writes: I spent ten torturous months looking for a house in nearby New Friends Colony, Sukhdev Vihar and Sarita Vihar. Perfectly decent people in their perfectly middle-class drawing rooms froze us off when they saw our business cards or heard our names. Others reneged on deals worked out through property dealers saying they wanted 'vegetarian tenants' (11).

Jalil's distress swiftly takes us to Skybaaba's short stories in his book V*egetarians Only: Stories of Telugu Muslims* (2015). The title suggests that it is triggered by instances of discrimination in the process of housing for Muslims even though the book is a compilation of stories covering several themes of the Telugu Muslim's everyday existence. *Vegetarians Only* is also the title of the short story which recounts the prejudiced treatment meted out to a couple who roamed the streets in search of a place to live. Skybaaba tells us this was an educated couple and the woman also did not wear the *purdah,* so they did not showcase any markers of Muslim identity at all. They also spoke Telugu which made one of the landlords assume they were Hindus. The landlord tells them without mincing any words, "I thought you were one of *our* people going by the Telugu you spoke. I am sorry but we can't rent out to muslims" (34).

The contrast between Muslim colonies and those others that they are surrounded by is so acute that the borders between these prominently stand out without any labelling. The stark contrast between Zakir Nagar and New Friends Colony is touted as an "ugly disparity" between "pockets of abysmal neglect" and "oases of privilege" that "exist cheek-by-jowl" (Jalil 11). Saeed Naqvi laments his realisation of this fact in the epilogue of his memoir when he writes, "we have lived in a state of un-institutionalized apartheid for decades, even centuries" (209).

While Robinson talks to Muslims from the lower classes of society, we see how their issues are markedly different from the Muslims that Kirmani interacts with. The most important for a majority of residents from the ghettos in Ahmedabad and Mumbai were questions of survival and helplessness at not being able to move out and conduct business as usual. On the other hand, the middle-class residents of Zakir Nagar lamented the influx of people from lower classes who, according to them, were responsible for the decline of the neighbourhood. The changing demographic of Zakir Nagar turned it from a society earlier known for the educated middle class to now being labelled as a Muslim-Ghetto. For this reason, while the Muslims residing in Zakir Nagar, redefined themselves in newer ways, they made sure they were viewed as different from the new residents who were mostly uneducated. This 'uneducated' class is blamed for the area's gradual deterioration resulting in the residents' unhappiness. If not for this, residing in a Muslim ethnic enclave was absolutely fine for those who chose to stay there. Kirmani records several residents who told her how the educated Muslims were moving away and out of the area because of the growing numbers of this "class of 'uneducated and ignorant' people" (48). To quote one Mrs. Rahim from Kirmani's survey, "*their* numbers started growing, and *they* grew so rapidly that we stopped liking this place. The colony was ruined" (48, emphasis added).

The vocabulary used for these residents that the majority distanced itself from, and therefore 'othered' in this process, is the same that is used by the victims for the perpetrators of violence, and vice versa. When the binary of 'us' versus 'them' is established, the 'other' becomes a faceless mass and loses individuality. It is, therefore, easier to attack and also increase the propensity of the attack by gaining a symbolic nature. By attacking a part, the whole is damaged. So, even though the major re-definitions for Muslims constitute their differences from the majority, middle class, 'educated' muslims, also simultaneously distance themselves from their own community members whom they believe to be 'ruining' society. It is intriguing to see how the choice of giving class identity precedence over religious identity is also a privileged choice, which, despite its limitations, still exists. For the members of the working lower class, are violently reduced to just one identity, that of being Muslims.

The research paper assessed and analysed how re-defined physical spaces in the wake of communal violence lead to the re-definition of the Indian Muslim's identity. The vicious cycle of alienation resulting in a stricter redrawing of boundaries between 'us' and 'them', has led Muslims to define the spaces they inhabit and being defined by those spaces in return.

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