3 Contesting Dilemmas: Schooling and Muslim Identity[1]

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Abstract

This paper explores matrix of education, identity and exclusion with respect to participation of Muslims in elementary education. Based on the everyday experiences of urban Muslim families residing in Jamia Nagar in Delhi it examines the intersecting factors that influence schooling decisions of Muslim parents. Focusing on the complex ways in which social exclusion is operationalized it highlights how increasing communal polarization in India impacts the unequal access of Muslim communities in India to basic services such as education and schooling. It foregrounds the importance of attending to everyday lived realities to address the question of educational backwardness of Muslim communities in India.

Key Words: Muslim Marginalisation, Education, Dilemmas, Schooling

Introduction

Muslim Marginalisation and Education

Education backwardness is presented as one of the primary cause of the socio-economic marginalisation of Muslims in India and inclusive education is widely acknowledged as a panacea. But when it comes to the Muslim communities in India, we see a carefully crafted illusion at work which attributes this educational backwardness to the community's inherent conservatism and opposition to 'modern' education. This holds the community responsible for its own educational backwardness, obfuscates the structural factors that exclude Muslims from education and creates space for the state to abrogate its responsibility to safeguard the educational and other socio-economic rights of the minority community.

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[1] This is based on the research paper titled 'Contesting Dilemmas: Muslim Identity and Education. A case Study of Jamia Nagar, Delhi' written by the author as a part of the year long National CRY Fellowship, Child Rights and You (CRY), India.
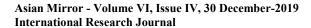
To unpack this it is important to foreground that the particular place which Indian Muslims occupy in the education matrix is due to a distinct form of marginalization. Despite the heterogeneous nature of the Muslim communities they carry the distinct burden of the being the homogenous other. The *stigmatization and demonization* that accompanies the process of *bothering* overlaps with class and gender identities to create reinforce and perpetuate Muslim marginalisation and exclusion.

Today Muslims in India – immensely diverse in terms of language, religious orientation and social class (Hansen, 2007) – are amongst India's most marginalised communities. The degree of this deprivation was highlighted almost a decade ago by the Report of the Prime Minister's High Level Committee on Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India, or the Sachar Committee Report (GoI, 2006). Though not a new revelation, what set the Sachar Committee Report apart was its use of data from state institutions (Hasan and Hasan, 2013) to demonstrate the decline of Muslims on most social and economic development indices. Since then, several government appointed committees have highlighted the continuing marginalisation of the Muslim communities, notably the Report of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, popularly known as the Justice Ranganath Misra Commission Report (GoI, 2007) and the report of the Post Sachar Evaluation Committee (GoI, 2014). Increasingly in terms of socio-economic marginalisation Muslim communities are barely distinguishable from other historically deprived social groups such as *dalits*.

In fact recent indicators suggest that Muslims are lagging behind Dalits in educational mobility (Jaffrelot and Kalaiyarasan, 2019). The problems faced by Muslims are a combination of those faced by the poor, by all minorities and exclusively by Muslims (Basant, 2012).

Muslims are amongst the most impoverished communities in India with a depleting asset base, below average work participation and lack of stable and secure employment (Fazal, 2013). The Sachar Committee Report, 2006, estimated Muslims as closely following the SCs and STs in reporting incidence of poverty in the year 2004–05. The Kundu Committee Report (GoI, 2014) has highlighted that poverty levels among Muslims in rural areas continued to remain higher than the national average, both during 2004–05 and 2011–12. An analysis of the nature of employment across different types of work shows that a disproportionately large number of Muslims tends to be concentrated in lower paying jobs, mostly in the unorganised sector. The source of income for most Muslim households is self-employment in non-

agricultural occupations. Muslims constitute a mere 6% of all government job employees, the lowest share of all communities and social groups. Further Muslim communities report high levels of unemployment. As high as 18% of the educated urban Muslim youth report unemployment (GoI, 2014). This economic marginalisation of Muslims is inextricably related with the relative deprivation of Muslims in the field of education. A time trend of literacy levels amongst different communities clearly indicates that the educational gap between Muslims and other communities has sharply increased, especially after the 1980s (GoI, 2006).

The literacy rate among Muslims is the lowest as compared to other communities (GoI, 2007). Muslims have the highest number of out of school children amongst religious groups based on the National Sample (NSS), 2014 estimates - 24.1% in rural areas and 24.7% in urban areas (Dubey et al., 2018). A high percentage of children (15%) have never attended school (GoI, 2014). At 5.23% Muslims have the lowest enrolment amongst all social categories in higher education (AISHE, 2017-18). Further the community has the dubious distinction of largest number of nowhere children, i.e. children neither attending an educational institution nor part of labour force (GoI, 2014).

Educational indicators also reveal persistent gender disparity. The socio-economic and educational marginalisation of Muslims is compounded by the exclusion of Muslims from the state apparatus of power, namely judiciary, police and civil service, [2] and under-representation amongst elected representatives (Gayer and Jaffrelot, 2012).

The Sachar Committee Report attributed this development deficit experienced by the Muslims to interplay of identity, equity and security (GoI, 2006). Based on extensive interactions with members of the community, the Sachar Committee report (GoI, 2006) acknowledged that identity and security concerns impact Muslims in complex ways, alluded to social discrimination but maintained a conspicuous silence on the communal question. The development deficit among Muslims cannot be isolated from the larger political climate of India marked by a palpable strengthening of communal forces and rising incidence of systemic discrimination and neglect of Muslims by the State.

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[2] In 2002 Muslims represented only 6.26% of the 479 High Court judges of India, 2.95% of the 5,018 Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers, and 4.025 of the 3,236 Indian Police Service (IPS) officers (ANHAD, 2007: 65-67).

Communalisation of Social Space

The impact of the increasing communalisation of social space can be seen in the identity based social discrimination and social exclusion (including processes which culminate in self-exclusion)[3] of Muslims pervasive in housing, employment,[4] and developmental schemes.[5] In the educational sphere this communalisation manifests itself in variety of ways - Hinduisation of schools (Benei, 2008), alteration of history books, communal bias in teaching, conflating Urdu as a Muslim language, systemic neglect of Urdu schools and lack of Urdu schooling options (Ahmad, 2002; Chatterjee, 2005; Faruqi, 2006), instances of discrimination in schools (Sikand, 2005; Trivedi, 2013) including elite schools (Erum, 2017). This communalisation of social spaces reinforces the sense of insecurity and perceptions of disadvantage amongst Muslims.[6] One of the most significant manifestations of this is the increasing ghettoization of Muslims in India, with Muslims often seeking 'safety in numbers' (Kaur, 2005). Drawing from case studies of cities across India, Gayer and Jaffrelot (2012) term the making of 'Muslim enclaves' in cities as 'primarily the outcome of organised violence (mostly communal) and only secondarily of economic marginalisation or discrimination in the housing market' (2012: 325).
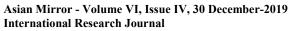
Present Study

This research paper attempts to explore how these social economic and political processes translate into educational exclusion of Muslim communities in everyday life. This research was conducted as a part of National CRY Fellowship 2009-2010, in Jamia Nagar, Delhi. Jamia Nagar is one of the largest

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[3] For example, Nasir's (2014) work on the Muslim experience of public health care services in Delhi highlights how historical memory translates into perceptions of disadvantage that then gradually initiate a process of self-exclusion, reinforcing a spiral of disadvantage.

[4] Thorat and Attewell (2007) highlight discrimination in the corporate sector in India against Muslims and Dalits. They show that Muslims (with an odds ratio of 0.35, compared to an otherwise equivalent high caste applicant), along with Dalits, are least likely to have a positive application outcome when posited against an otherwise equally qualified person with a high caste Hindu name.

[5] For example, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), a government flagship scheme for poverty alleviation which provides a cushion for the unemployed, hardly seem to cater to the Muslim community, with Muslim households constituting only 2.3% of those that got work under the scheme.

[6] The Sachar Committee Report (GoI, 2006) also highlighted the heightened feeling of insecurity among Muslims, especially in communally sensitive states.

concentrations of Muslim population in Delhi,[7] located in close proximity to Jamia Millia University. The choice of Jamia Nagar was determined by the long standing association of the researcher with community members prior to field work in this area which not only facilitated entry but also enabled the researcher to delve into a sensitive and often politicized area of perceived /real discrimination and exclusion in education that the community members face.

The study comprised interviews with twenty families with children of school going age and series of focus group discussions (FGDs) in the community, to understand the schooling decisions in the community. Since the researcher practised snowball sampling or chain referral she was able to conduct the interviews inside the homes with families. The focus was on understanding the life situations of children belonging to Muslim families, locating the schooling decision of the parents, analyzing how the community imagines an educated Muslim and understand the student's experience of education and their aspirations.

The study was carried out in 2009 in Jamia Nagar post the Batla house encounter. On 19th September 2008, police shooting in Batla House, Jamia Nagar led to the killing of two SIMI operatives and a police officer[8]. The nation's attention was fixated on Jamia Nagar in the worst way possible. The 'Batla House Encounter' fixated the media gaze on Jamia Nagar and won it notorious popularity as the 'Terror Den' housing terrorists, SIMI operatives and supplies of arms'. Though there are different versions of the shootout, six month later when the researcher began her fieldwork, the reverberations of the 'Operation Batla House' continue to remain palpable. The reverberations are not limited to those manifested in the public sphere in Jamia Nagar–visible in the political campaigns that accompanied the Delhi Assembly Polls (November 2008), collective sense of vindication when the Delhi High Court directed the NHRC to conduct an enquiry into the encounter (May 2009), the angst at the NHRC report which gave the Delhi Police a 'clean chit'(July 2009), trepidation after the Jama Masjid shooting on the 2nd anniversary of

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[7] Jamia Nagar is amongst the largest concentrations of Muslim population along with Seelampur and Old Delhi (Gayer, 2012).

[8] The Police version of the shootout reads something like this - fierce half-an-hour exchange of fire in which Delhi Police killed two terrorists including key SIMI operative who allegedly played a pivotal role in the September 13 Delhi Blasts but lost their celebrated officer. While those who challenge the police version call the encounter a fake one and have been demanding a judicial enquiry.

Operation Batla House (September 2010) - but the manner in which its ingrained in the collective memory of the community, like a festering wound.

Conducting this study in the aftermath of such an event allowed the researcher to understand the impact of long term exclusionary processes. Extreme polarization, clubbed the very heterogeneous Muslim community as one the monolithic collections by equating the actions of individuals for entire community with narratives conflating religion, specifically Islam, and terrorism. The national media are playing to the tunes of the right wing rhetoric and representing Muslims as the 'other'. The Batla House encounter and ensuing media attention did not create fractious fault lines of our society, rather they brought these long term fissures to the fore, for all to see. An impact on the psyche of a community is not only felt in community spaces, but also households, drawing rooms, schools and conversations with the researcher. With this background, the researcher attempted to understand the complicated issues of self-perception, identity and education choices and how they are magnified in catalytic moments like the Batla House encounter.

The study sought to examine the substantial gulf between the educational goal of ensuring equality, broadening access, mainstreaming the socially deprived and the reality of the continued deficit vis-à-vis education amongst the Muslims. An examination of the issue of equality and education from rights based perspective clearly establishes that the practice of education should be informed and shaped to incorporate all sections. For education to be inclusive the institutional provision of education must be guided by an understanding of, decision making with respect to schooling, which takes place at an individual level i.e. by the students and parents. The decisions at an individual level are intertwined with complex socio-cultural- economic phenomenon like identity, alienation, socio-cultural beliefs, monetary resources, gender etc.

The present study attempts to explore the question of why is there a gap in educational attainment of Muslims on the above premise by an examination of life experiences of a small section of Muslims. To understand the matrix of education, identity and exclusion with respect to participation of Muslims in elementary education, an attempt was made to delineate the process through which identity operates and impacts decision making processes. Here it's important to note that Muslims like any other group have a plurality of identities and decision making is also impacted by a combination of factors. But an

exploration of the everyday realities of a small sample of Muslims through this study provides an insight into how identity acts and impacts other factors influencing decisions pertaining to education. In the process the study uncovers the experience of stereotypes, images and perceptions along with lived experiences of members of the Muslim community.

Locating Jamia Nagar

Jamia Nagar, a Muslim-dominated neighbourhood in south-east Delhi, lies just behind Jamia Millia Islamia University[9] and many attribute the genesis of the locality to its shared vicinity with the Jamia campus. With 90% of its residents Muslims, Jamia Nagar is one of the largest concentrations of Muslim population in Delhi,[10] with officially a population of around 1.2 lakh (Registrar of India, 2001), though unofficially the numbers are pegged at 3.75 lakh. Nestled between the river Yamuna on the east and Mathura Road on the west, the permeable boundaries of Jamia Nagar include a collection of 10-odd colonies such as Shaheen Bagh, Zakir Nagar, Batla House, Noor Nagar, Gafoor Nagar, Okhla Vihar, Haji Colony, Gaffar Manzil, Joga Bai Extention, Shaheen Bagh and Johari Farm. etc. The area is often referred to as a 'Muslim *ilaqa*' (area) by its residents and/or 'ghetto' by outsiders, though the term 'Muslim neighbourhood', borrowing from Gayer and Jaffrelot (2012), is more appropriate. A majority of the residents of Jamia Nagar are migrants, generally from neighbouring states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, though one is likely to find people belonging to most Indian states in the area (Abidi, 2009; Kirmani, 2009).

Jamia Nagar severely lacks civic amenities and public services. Lack of cleanliness due to non-clearance of garbage and open overflowing drains are common sights in Jamia Nagar. During rains the situation gets worse as all the dirt and filth starts floating around. Despite several complaints by the RWA and efforts to get the civic administration little has been done. A similar situation of neglect is reported when it comes to water supply and electricity. Though there is no data at the ward level regarding water supply and usage, a recent study conducted in this area found though 50% of respondents had access to water

[9] Jamia Millia Islamia, originally established in 1920 became a Central University by an act of the Indian Parliament in 1988 and was declared as a Muslim minority educational institution in 2011.

[10] Jamia Nagar is amongst the largest concentrations of Muslim population along with Seelampur and Old Delhi (Gayer, 2012).

many stated that they were not satisfied with the services. Also found that 15.07% had no access to water for household use (Abidi, 2008).

In terms of access to health care there is only one government run health centre catering to the entire population of Okhla, most of the respondents commented on the permanent rush there and derogatory treatment by the staff. This is also substantiated by a recent study carried out in the area which talked about the how Muslim pockets in Delhi such as Okhla area are excluded from adequate health facilities and in the few facilities that exist the staff is arrogant, rude and unhelpful vis-à-vis their cooperative behavior to Hindus (Abidi, 2008). There are many small clinics run by local practitioners of all kinds and quacks are in plenty, most of the people avail these health services and utilise the private hospitals in the area namely Holy Family Hospital and Escorts.

The education facilities within the area are severely lacking, though they are marginally better than the other basic services due to the presence of Jamia Millia Islamia. The neighborhood has only three Municipal Corporation run primary schools (Batla House, Okhla and Block D, Abul Fazal) and two Government Senior Secondary Schools. The number in clearly inadequate in light of the population especially given that large segment of the population belongs to poor families. In course of fieldwork the researcher came across several schools (over 30) in the locality most of which taught till grade 5th or 8th but the common unifying thread was that they were all 'un-recognized schools'.

Living in Jamia Nagar and (Lack of) Choices

A logical question that would occur in light of the above discussion is why so many people choose to stay in Jamia Nagar, especially the large populace that falls in the middle income group. Majority of the respondents stated that despite its poor state of civic amenities Jamia Nagar offered significant benefits primary being a sense of security owing to its large Muslim population and a sense of belongingness and affinity to a larger community. In the FGD's that the researcher conducted the Muslim participants irrespective of gender and social background reported that Jamia Nagar was safe for Muslims. The women were particularly vocal regarding their safety in the neighborhood vis-à-vis other areas in Delhi. Several respondents also talked about the low levels of rent in the area.

A number of participants in the talked about the difficulties in renting places in other areas due to the 'prevailing bias and fear against Muslims'. They lamented about how living together, celebrating festivals

together, sharing and supporting each other were stories of yester years. This sense of nostalgia was also accompanied by the idea that there had been an overall distancing between religious groups in terms of social relations as well as practices. A very significant feature that emerged during the FGD's was the manner in which the respondents consistently related ghettoization and residing in Jamia Nagar with episodes of communal violence ranging from the Babri Masjid , Gujarat Riots to the recent incidents in aftermath of the 2008 blasts.

The discussions brought to light the varied manner in which the respondents comprehended and interpreted experiences (heard/seen or read) of communal violence and conflict. In this regard it's important to understand that memories are created and fluid, not fixed and given. The choice is rarely between memory and oblivion but rather among shifting and competing remembrances. Public and private settings are not just arenas in which memory is expressed, but also formed. They play a part in constituting what we recall and how, defining what a salient act is, what constitutes an injury and what constitutes legal and historical evidence. The dynamic interaction between memory and response works in the opposite direction too. What we remember and feel compelled to relate affects our existing structures of public witnessing and recollection. Experience and memory belong to individuals and at some level they are incommunicable. But when instances of hate crimes or persecution of a particular community are brought into public view neither remembrance nor understanding is purely personal. This was reflected in the discussions as well as the interviews. In response to the question: "In your neighborhood families do families of other communities reside?" all the 20 respondents stated that this is a 'Muslim area' where Muslim belonging to all castes and groups live. Seventeen out of the twenty respondents said that 'same religion but different caste families' reside in the neighborhood. Three respondents stated that 'same religion and same caste families' reside in the neighborhood. All the twenty respondents said that there has been little change in the composition of their neighborhood though many people shared incidents of eminent Muslims "professors of JNU, lawyers who had big houses in Nizamuddin shifted to this area after 2002".

Identity and Self Perception

Our everyday lives see us fleeting through a web of a myriad identities each interconnected to the other in some way be it religion, gender, class, age, nationality, often competing but each remains significant as it defines who we are. Most simply put 'Social Identity' is a person's definition of who he or she is,

including personal attributes and attributes shared with others (Baron & Byrne, 2004). A sense of identity results from perceptions about oneself, self-reflection, and external characterizations. Identity is not a fixated but fluid and shifting, a constantly evolving process of "becoming" rather than simply "being" (Dillon, 1999). Individual identity can shift over time, due to personal experiences and larger social changes. In this light a significant concept is that of identity salience, which recognizes contributing factors and processes that make one identity (in the present research being Muslim) of greater importance in the hierarchy of multiple identities that comprise a sense of self. According to Stryker, discrete identities may be thought of as ordered in a salience hierarchy. As individuals become more committed to a given role, that role will assume higher identity salience.

Interactions in Jamia Nagar brought out how respondents accorded primary importance to their religious identity because in addition to meeting spiritual needs it also offered many non-religious material, psychological, and social benefits, including community networks, economic opportunities, educational resources, and peer trust and support, which many felt was necessary given that increasing communalisation of public space in India. In light of this the researcher wanted to explore the manner in which Muslim parents view the identity component of their personality as identity provides individuals and communities a 'sense of belonging' to a particular group. During the interviews the respondents were asked how they view their identity.

Most of the respondents stated that all the identity markers present in the interview schedule namely Family, religion, gender, caste were important. However 50 per cent identified religion as the main identity marker, while four attributed primacy to both gender and religion saying that their main identity was that of being a 'Muslim woman' while one said that her husband and children determined her identity. Five respondents did not agree with choices provided and hence opted for 'Any other'. One of the respondents defined their identity as being 'Indian first and Muslim second' while the rest defined it in terms of their occupation. In a very telling remark one of the respondents talked about how he always thought of being Muslim as given, but increasingly he was being made to realise that this religious identity is what defines him irrespective of whether he chooses to be defined by it or not- "...In India today, a Muslim is just a Muslim and one's regional or linguistic identity does not matter"

Islam and Self Perception

All the interactions surrounding the question of identity saw the consistent use of the dichotomy of 'Good Muslim' and 'Bad Muslim'. The respondents went to great lengths to explain to the researcher that the religion stood for peace, ibadat, brotherhood often citing Quaranic verses to explain their viewpoint. A telling realization that emerged from the responses was the extent to which the varied expressions of the construction and propagation of Muslims (*demonic*) image have impacted people's understanding of themselves and their collective identity. The crystallization of this realization was clearly demonstrated by the act of communicating identity in terms of explanations that negate the demonic imagery.

Islam as a faith is not so much concerned with building the house, but with who stays in it...not with making the sword but with the one who yields it...basically it about being a more evolved person. Despite this the collective perception is that Muslims are violent etc. Today like never before, I as a Mussalman feel the need to define myself in terms of what I am not, rather than what I am...

Mushtaq (Former Government School Principal)

Drawing from the above answers the researcher asked the respondents whether they regard religion as a divisive factor based on their lived experiences. Seventy percent of respondents gave the answer as an affirmative. When asked in what way do they feel that religion divided people, four respondents said that the ways of life of diverse religious groups were different, four respondents said there was mutual sense of fear and suspicion, five respondents commented about how Muslims were treated differently in healthcare, jobs etc. on account of their religion while one of the respondents said that these differences were created by the biased media.

Ninety per cent of the respondents said that Muslims in particular face discrimination in their day to day life. However only three respondents said that the discrimination is out in the open, all the other respondents talked about the subtle and discreet ways in which discrimination is practiced-closely linked with the prejudices and stereotypes regarding the community fanned by the media and certain vested groups in collusion with propaganda by Right wing organizations; the increasing isolation of Muslims on account of ghettoization, difficulties in finding employment (economic boycott in extreme cases); persecution and violence.

When the researcher questioned the respondents as to whether they have personally experienced discrimination only 75% of the respondents said no. While on the surface this may appear puzzling especially since in the earlier question the same respondents had vehemently expressed the a host of reasons as to why they felt Muslims were discriminated against, delving deeper threw up some interesting revelations regarding the way people experience discrimination and share their experiences of it. Many of the respondents talked about how pondering over acts of discrimination simply bred greater fear and insecurity which is why they had started to ignore and turn a blind eye to what minor acts which made them feel bad but at least there was no violence. Some of the differences in treatment which the respondents noticed are mentioned as tighter security checks and uncomfortable social interactions. A majority of the respondents did not want to christen some of the experiences they or their family members had as 'discrimination' (Bhed-bhav) and chose to opt for milder terms such as prejudice, animosity, indifference, insecurity etc.

Being Muslim and Schooling Choices

To understand the interplay of this embroiled Muslim identity and education, the central question which the researcher sought answers too was 'Whether being Muslim impacted schooling decisions 'of ordinary Muslims. The researcher opted to explore 'schooling', as education occupies a unique position in larger context of marginalization of Muslims. Educational backwardness is seen as one of the main causes for real and/or perceived alienation of Muslims [i] and at the same time inclusive education is widely acknowledged as the panacea due to the inherent emancipatory potential of modern education (Planning Commission, 2006)

Parents: Enablers and Moderators

'We want the education for our child that we never had'

The interviews were conducted in the homes with the parents and children often sitting together. In most of the cases it was the mothers who were only there while occasionally both the parents were present. In the initial part of the interviews wherein the researcher tried to explore the educational background of the parents and their conception of education invariably all the discussions began with an exploration of the childhood experiences of the parents in their native homes in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar, how at that time education was 'not viewed as that important 'in some of their families. Especially many of the mothers recounted very similar tales of going to the nearest school, most of the times along with the other siblings,

thinking of school as 'just another part of growing up and learning' along with housework and dini talim, and how they never remembered being stressed about homework or exams or when and how they finished their education. The fathers in most of the cases (educated to a significantly higher level than their spouse) though maintaining the stance that in their times education was less competitive and options were fewer, talked about how they valued education as it had facilitated their transition from their native places to Delhi.

Here it's significant to note that the there was a discernible feeling amongst the parents that today education was increasingly emerging as the single most important factor which safeguarded the child. The parents would end recounting their past with statements like '*today even girls cannot afford to be lax about their education, who will marry them, even in our community boys have started asking for girls who are at least educated enough to teach the children'; 'I had the back up of farm-work, my son does not have that, with so much of the land divided between the family and us settled in Delhi, I don't even envisage any of my children going back. In fact even if they wanted to they can never adjust there now'.*

Sometimes we feel Embarrassed

Many of the parents especially the non-English speaking ones shared their experiences of how today they felt embarrassed and a little inadequate not being able to converse fluently in English at their work place or the wives when they socialized with their spouses seniors and subordinates at the work place, at the PTA meetings and so on. In fact some of the mothers talked about how they hesitated in going to schools without their husbands even to attend functions like sports day or annual day which simply required being part of the audience (vis-à-vis PTA meetings or other parent teacher interaction) as they felt they weren't that "Hi-fi" and converse well in English . Therefore almost all of them had an aspiration that their child is conversant in English.

The Parent as a cultural moderator so that the child can 'fit in'

Another major concern shared by the parents while talking about their education and the education they would want for their child was regarding how while majority of the religious and cultural values that defined them as persons today 'just naturally became a part of their lives', without too much effort from their parents, extended family elders or teachers vis-à-vis the case of their children wherein they had to consciously inculcate the similar sensibilities in their child. How they as parents were a lot more

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'mindful' – what was the school environment, where to send child to play or for *dini talim* as area had some odd people (excessively religious who kept on preaching Islamiyat or excessive modern who tried to act like 'everyone else') how to explain something offensive said about Muslims in news or media or movies and so on.

In fact this concern was shared at various points in the interviews. Parents would juxtapose their own education back home generally as a part of larger families in a more 'Muslim milieu' with their child's education in a nuclear set up in Delhi where parents consciously tried to familiarize the child with the culture. Many parents mentioned how in their families, 'family values' included an orienting the child towards the religion, academic achievement and conformity to certain discipline. However such orientation often proved very tricky for parents as they would have to often find themselves explaining things they did not fully understand and answering questions to which they did not have answers. Some parents cited problems their children faced in schools due to wearing a headscarf or extra-long skirts, jibes faced in school on account of their religion which often put the parents in an awkward position wherein they had to answer their children's questions about faith and religion to which there were no simple answers.

Parents explained how they tried their best to act as 'cultural moderators' ensuring that their child in the future does not become the 'Maulana type Muslim', excessively religious or 'too modern type' but is rooted in their culture and basic religious traditions. They just wanted their child to be well adjusted and 'fit in' amongst the Muslim community and as well as outside.

The Parents Quest for Child's Education
'Modern' education a Priority
Following this, interviews with parents in all 20 households recorded the factors shaping parental preference for the schools they chose for their children. The interviews made clear that while parents accorded a clear priority to modern education they also sought it in combination with an education that meets their 'identity needs'. Majority of the respondents clearly stated that their choice of school was determined by their ability to afford the school fees, English as the medium of instruction and to a certain extent facilities that the school provided such as playground, computer education, extracurricular activities like theatre, painting.

Why can't there be English, Hindi and Urdu

It really saddens me that there is no way to educate our children in Urdu, for every language to prosper there is a need for formal education in it also. I see the difference from our times and now Urdu is virtually disappearing... we speak at home in Urdu but none of the children can read or write eloquently ...their children will not even be able to speak in it

Tamana

As long as there is Bollywood Urdu will survive, but it can never thrive now...my grandson says he took Sanskrit because its scoring I asked him will you not score better in a language you've grown up with…Why not take Urdu? He said his school does not offer that and the teacher says Urdu came from Hindi so it's better to learn Hindi. I wanted to tell him it's the other way around but what's the point...

Farhan (grandfather)

While parents were unanimous in the priority accorded to English education many repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited choices they had when it came to finding schools that taught Urdu. Many parents lamented about the fact that most public schools have Sanskrit or foreign languages like French as an option for the third language but none provided Urdu. In a similar vein one of the respondents whose daughter studied in Urdu medium in the nearby Government school talked about how her daughter found it very difficult to find books even for the Board classes in Urdu and had to buy Hindi guides and translate them into Urdu.

Appropriate education for Girls

Even after 'growing big' (puberty), girls have to wear skirt as its compulsory in the uniform. I spoke to some of the other mothers who reside here and they were also very disturbed about this. We have sent a letter to the principal requesting an option of shalwar kameez. I was thinking of shifting my daughter to CJM or Mater Dei for this reason only

Sabeena

Many parents expressed the difficulties they face in choosing *appropriate* schools for their girls. For parents many of whom aspire to remain true to their native roots located in rural or semi-urban Bihar and UP, it's difficult to locate schools which ensure that their girls can avail benefits of modern secular education that provides some degree of certainty of access to *respectable* marriages and if need be

appropriate employment but does not corrupt them into western ways, an institution which is not co-educational , has a modest dress and is nearby to ensure reach of the parents in case of an 'threatening' eventuality. The researcher noted that in case of girls unlike boys, in case of absence of a combination of the above mentioned criterion the parents generally compromised on the quality of schooling and sent the girls to nearby (often unrecognised) schools within Jamia Nagar which promise girls education (not co-education), classes in Urdu and sometimes dini talim, have salwar kameez as the uniform but what they do not tell is that they are not necessarily recognised by CBSE/ICSE or up till class 12.

The parents who made the choice of sending their girls to mainstream public schools was on account of one of the following factors: either one of the siblings generally brother was admitted to the same school or the girls were sent to a convent. This illustrates the manner in which schooling decisions at an individual level are closely linked with collective group behaviour. In situation in which individual preferences and social norms do not correspond, complex socio-cultural economic phenomenon and issues such as alienation, worldview, aspirations, attitudes towards gender etc. interact with each other creating dilemmas in making choices (Jha & Jhingran 2005)

Schools that do not discriminate against 'our' children

Many parents reported facing discrimination and visible hostility from teachers and school authorities while trying to seek admission for their children in public and government schools. The families complained that despite meeting several criterions such as income, proximity to place of residence, educational background of both parents their children were denied admission on flimsy grounds. Some of the families openly talked about having to use 'jugaad'/contacts to get their child admitted to public schools. In fact Interaction with some of the parents pointed to the manner in which they have altered their preference of schools for their children in light of these. Many talked about consciously opting for *Christian* schools rather than the *Hindu's regular public schools as at some level Christian schools are 'good' and respect minority sentiments.* One of the parents remarked "*Christians also feel threatened in the present environment; everyone knows their (Right wing Hindutva groups) slogan is pehle kasai phir isai, they are sensitive to the pressures we face".* They also explained the choice in terms of *pragmatism* as Christian schools are generally convents, have better command over English and strong emphasis on discipline.

Our children often feel singled out. My daughters do hijab (head scarf), it's an issue with the school authorities. Why? In my elder daughters interview at Delhi University 50% of the interview was about why she wore the hijab. Everyone has a problem when we assert our identity, if nuns wear a head scarf, Sikhs wear a turban it's acceptable but if we do burqa it's backward.

<div align="right">

Ruksar

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Parents shared experiences of their children being 'unnecessarily picked on, classified in front their peers and harassed by teachers'. In interviews parents repeatedly made references to derogatory comments by teachers on eating and dressing habits of the Muslim children. This was corroborated by the children themselves when the researcher interacted with them many of whom talked about how they had to repeatedly face jibes in school.

One of the respondents also shared a personal instance pertaining to her child detailing the most appalling incident of belittling a child wherein "*One of the teachers termed Muslims as 'non Indian' and pointing to my daughter said that these Muslims are always involved in these terrorist activities. Hearing about the incident I complained to the principal and wanted to withdraw my daughter. However the principal was so upright that the moment it came to her notice she apologized for the comments in the assembly hall and announced that any comments in the future will lead to resignation of teachers and students alike. There are just people who believe in secular values but there is no denying the prejudice our children are exposed to each day*"

Higher education in a Muslim ethos

After school, my daughter's first preference is Jamia...the atmosphere is familiar, it's close to home, sab jaan pehchann ke vahin ko recommend karte hain (all relatives and known people recommend that place). Look at Delhi University, newspapers are carrying supplements of children who are applying, look at their dresses- girls wear short dresses, shots- our daughters cannot fit in there.

<div align="right">

Nusrat

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Sixty five percent of the respondents explained their preference for sending their sons or daughters to Jamia Millia Islamia or Aligarh Muslim University primarily on account of the fact that these universities offered the combination of quality education, a sound reputation as educational institutions and a 'Muslim

ethos' which was extremely critical for the young Muslim children on the threshold of adulthood so that they do not fall in *wrong company* particularly the boys and the girls do not get *corrupted*. In case of girls another factor was that according to parents the marriage prospects of girls increase within the community if she belongs to either of the two universities. What each of the parents meant when they said Muslim ethos varied in shades but the unifying thread was presence of sizeable Muslims amongst the student population, faculty members and management, refection of Muslim culture in the dressing, language, syllabi- a place Muslim children could easily identify and fit into. Others stated that while Muslim ethos was important it was not the deciding factor and as parents they opted for JMI or AMU because of the quota for internal students for example if a child gave secondary school exams from Jamia he would qualify as an internal student when he sat for entrance exams for engineering, medicine etc.

After working I feel that maybe going to Jamia/AMU is not that great as that is very different from the world outside. Then you are definitely thought as katar musalman.

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Zubaida (25 year old working in a media house)

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However many of the respondents strongly stated that they would consciously try and not send their children to JMI or AMU as these universities were largely dominated by Muslims and provided a very 'familiar' but skewed perspective, not preparing the children for the world outside. As one of the parents put it "*this reflects our jhund mentality...we think these places are safe so we send children only there ...others start calling these Muslim Universities and do not send their children...This seclusion should stop and there is need for more healthy cultural interaction so that there are not just pre-judgements and distance but real life experiences and togetherness*"

Religious Education

Education without moral education and character is not complete. It is Important for the child to understand the basic tenets of Islam, what's written in the Quran Shareef... gunaa if do not follow

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Fazl

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Yes Dini Talim is important as it is part of our identity. Also I feel knowing the religious precepts is more important for today's children, as it ensures that one is not vulnerable to the circulating misinterpretations

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Yusuf

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All of the 20 respondents regarded *dini talim* as indispensable for the child and continually stressed on its role in promotion of Islam, Islamic culture and learning. Many of the parents talked about the relevance of education in Islam and how in the early Islamic periods there was no rigid dualism between 'Religious' and 'worldly' knowledge unlike today, but even in present times the parents felt that education was not complete without basic knowledge of one's faith. In fact some of the parents talked about the growing necessity for teaching their children the basics of Islamiyat. At the heart of the parental preference for religious education for their children is a desire to ensure that children do not get alienated from their faith in a fast-changing external environment where all kinds of mis-information is being propagated regarding their faith. Seventy per cent of the respondents said that they would have preferred if religious education was imparted as a part of the school curriculum. In fact a significant reason for the mushrooming of the small cramped unrecognised schools in Jamia Nagar is that they offer *Islamiyat* as a subject

Majority of the parents opted for a *Maulana or Maulani* to come at home and teach or taught the child themselves. In this context some of the parents reminisced their childhood wherein they would go to the madrasa or makhtab attached to a nearby masjid, but lamented that these options were 'fraught with risk' in today's times because of the association of such places with 'Islamic fundamentalism'. The parents who sent their children to the masjid to acquire *dini talim* were from the slum settlements.

Different worldviews: Voices of Children and youth

Gaining an insight into children and youth's perspective on the subject theme of the present research was an important part of what the study sought to explore. However the researcher was unable to talk to the children separately in the houses she visited to conduct the interviews and in most of the cases the whole family (grandparents, parents- generally the mother only, children including older siblings and in some cases other members of the joint family such as aunts, cousins) would be sitting together while the interview was going on. However the discussions and deliberations within the family members brought to light some critical differences between the perception of parents and children. They were the first to ask questions and many of their statements were expressed in agreement or opposition to what the other family members were saying.

Home?

I feel strange when we go back to Gorakhpur...It's nice for a day or two because both my mothers and fathers families are there yet I cannot connect with them...Other than the food everything is different. My parents are happier there than here...My life is here.

Irfan (16 years)

In process of interviews the children often grinned or contradicted their parents when they cited customs 'back home'/ 'our home' (their native village or town) and parents too expressed the manner in which their children did not understand things. Thus whereas for parents home is still their native places, the children see Jamia Nagar and Delhi as their home, their neighbourhood and school mates as friends and their reference point is the life they see around themselves rather than what the parents tell them about or their native place they visit during holidays and marriages.

Growing up: A greater consciousness of Identity

The adolescent children who were covered in the interviews with families by virtue of their presence while the interviews were being conducted exhibited a greater consciousness of their religious identity in the conversations. However this could also be because they were more comfortable expressing their opinion generally talking in English vis-à-vis parents who preferred Hindi, using slang and exhibiting greater inquisitiveness and interest in the researchers' background and research.

I don't like acting differently…

I am doing by B.A. from Jamia and am one of the few girls from this area who goes without a burqa, random people come up to me and say its gunah if you are not covered and especially if the hair on your head show. They complain to my mother and she herself has told me in different ways ranging from explaining to scolding. But my father supports me.

Tasleem (19 years)

How can I offer namaz five times a day when I go for tuitions right after school, my father can go because he works here and it's his own shop.

Sameer (15 years)

For teachers day when I wore a saree and bindi my aunts and cousins were taunting my parents that I will marry a Hindu…I told them this is our national dress…they do not understand these things.

Nagma (16 years)

Many of the children generally the elder children in the household talked about the manner in which they did not believe in and nor prescribe to several customs and practices that their parents and relatives believed they should practice in the name of being Muslim.

Islam mandates this…

I wear a hijab and am proud to wear one because that is how I understand my religion and its teachings...

Sehar (16 years)

My son at the age of 12 keeps all the roza which neither his father or I do

Ariba (Mother)

My father is very lax he practices things as and when he can, sometimes he wants to sometimes he doesn't. My mother also emulates him most of the times…I think the true way of practicing our religion is to be disciplined.

Sameer (14 years)

Juxtaposed to the above in many households (in the presence of parents) children expressed the opinion that while their parents were not very particular about following certain Islamic norms in terms of dress, rituals and practices they had chosen to practice Islam 'way it was meant to'.

I Think people imagine differences, some create them …

I think this whole Hindu-Muslim thing is a myth…I never felt anything even close to what everyone is saying till date even once. My friends in school would tease me the moment they learnt about 'the anus' in biology but everyone was teased on something.

Anas (15 years)

One of the ladies from the neighbourhood runs camps in the slums. I volunteered to help as she is my mother's friend…they teach all weird things in the name of Islam to girls….You should wear ¾ the

sleeves Kurta, cover head at all times, not visit sufi shrines as its disregarding the dead…girls should become only doctors or teachers..

Ruksar (15 years)

Some of the children while sharing their experiences talked about how they thought that the whole 'Being Muslim' part was often distorted and/or overplayed. They talked about their personal experiences in school or the community and expressed their reservations regarding this 'popular myth' of "Muslims are being treated differently" often while supporting a point made by the parents or contradicting it.

Working: Opens up a whole new world

I am staying here for two years and have been working …earlier everyone used to tell our parents treat them like girls not boys today the same people call me when their daughters need to know about educational and other opportunities in Delhi

Samina (24 years) tenant of one of the interviewees

I was working in a media house accused of making retrogressive 'K' serials that typify Hindus. I never felt that 'oh I am Muslim'. In fact so many people in production, lead actors and so on are non-Hindu. Our people are not exposed…they are just confined here (Jamia Nagar)…one needs to step out before making claims.

Basid (25 years)

Our relative, his marriage broke because he occasionally drinks beer, has a mixed group of friends, works in an event management company…can you believe his Delhi University educated modern fiancée with whom this arranged marriage was fixed said he is 'over liberal' and 'not a good practicing Muslim'…what does the guy do..

Asim (20 years)

The younger generation in the families who are moving out of the traditional occupations and interacting in wider circles are confronted with their own set of dilemmas when their values clash with what the occupation demands.

For the children and young adults in families being Muslim came with questions to which there were no right answers . They felt at home at Jamia nagar and their referral point was not the extended families back in the native places. On the question of motifs of Muslim identity like veil and particular patterns of dressing some expressed the view that it was their right as citizens belonging to a religious minority in a secular, democratic country while others felt more comfortable 'merging in' and said they did not want to stand out. Many young people expressed how they were uncomfortable with community policing wherein how they dressed, who they interacted with was often questioned even though their parents did not raise such questions. They vociferously talked about the insurability that sometimes came with living in Jamia Nagar and the need for greater exposure and interaction.

Towards a Conclusion

The paper highlights the contesting dilemmas that parents face in making educational choices for their children in Jamia Nagar. Parents described themselves as being very 'conscious', 'mindful', 'careful' about the choices they were making vis-à-vis the child's education – what was the school environment, where to send the child to play or for dini talim as the choices available often lay at two end of the spectrum– 'excessively religious' people in the neighbourhood who preach *islamiyat* or excessively modern who tried to act like 'everyone else'. For many parents the biggest worry was how to straddle these two extremes. Their responses constantly brought up the dichotomy of 'Good Muslim' and 'Bad Muslim' and the difficulty they faced in ensuring that the child is brought up in Muslim ways without falling into these stereotypes.

Parents regarded modern education as the single most important factor which safeguarded their child future and clearly articulated a preference for sending children to reputed Public schools. . However their narratives echoed an increasing sense of helplessness and exasperation at the manner in which it was difficult for their child to gain admission. Even though most parents shied away from using the term "discrimination"- many talked about the fact that though they did not have substantial proof it seemed like the nearby schools had some sort of a "prefixed quota of just this much and no more Muslims"; parents cited the how the neighbourhood points seemed to have marginal weightage in the case of nearby schools, others talked about having to use 'jugaad' and 'approach' to get their child admitted saying that this was not an option available to the ordinary Muslim.

When children get admission, parents has to deal with their children being unnecessarily picked on, classified in front of their peers and harassed by teachers. Parents repeatedly made references to derogatory comments made by teachers on the eating (aggressive temperament linked with non vegetarianism) and dressing habits (headscarf or extra-long skirts) of Muslim children. These situations led the parents to constantly face the predicament - should they placate the child and tell her/him to forget the issue, take up the issue with the school and risk being labelled as over religious or limit the options to Muslim managed schools where their culture is respected yet the child may feel alienated in the future. Many talked about consciously opting for Christian schools rather than the Hindu regular public schools as at some level Christian schools are 'good' and respect minority sentiments. They also explained the choice in terms of pragmatism as Christian schools are generally convents, have better command over English and strong emphasis on discipline.

Many parents expressed the difficulties they face in choosing appropriate schools for their girls. For parents many of whom aspire to remain true to their native roots it's difficult to locate schools which ensure that their girls can avail benefits of modern secular education that provides certainty of access to respectable marriages and if need be appropriate employment but does not corrupt them into western ways, an institution which is not co-educational, has a modest dress and is nearby to ensure reach of the parents in case of an 'threatening' eventuality. The researcher noted that in case of girls unlike boys, in case of absence of a combination of the above mentioned criterion the parents generally compromised on the quality of schooling and sent the girls to nearby (often unrecognised) schools within Jamia Nagar which promise girls education (not co-education), classes in Urdu and sometimes dini talim, have salwar kameez as the uniform but not necessarily recognised by CBSE/ICSE or up till class 12. The parents who sent their girls to public schools preferred convents and if they opted for co-educational schools it was usually on account of the fact that other siblings particularly brothers were studying in the in the same school.

The aspirations, concerns and opinions of the children and young persons on education often diverged with adults in the family and echoed their questions and search for answers about what being Muslim meant.

This paints the picture of how the persistent paradox of Muslim educational backwardness operates on the ground. While policy discourse repeatedly calls for modern education as the panacea for the educational backwardness of Muslims in India, the real life situations demonstrate the everyday problems that ordinary Muslims face in accessing these very opportunities leading to further isolation, exclusion

Way Forward

The present research provides an insight into the manner in which shrinking of shared spaces and communal construction of identity impact everyday life seen from the standpoint of educational choices. It reflects the manner in which the negative implications of larger socio-political processes manifested in the form of a sense of exclusion, alienation and insecurity impact educational options. It gives tangible evidence of what Bauman (2006) describes as *liquid fear,* the intractable undetectable fear for one's security and freedom percolating daily lives of certain sections of people impacting their everyday engagements. An acknowledgement and understanding of everyday processes, especially the factors that limit the choices or render them as non-existent options for Muslims in something as fundamental as a child's education is very critical at the policy levels. The fact that a shared space like schooling has become an exclusionary space reflects a serious danger. At the policy and practise level it is important to work on strengthening inclusive common spaces including schools and inclusive community practises. Inclsuive Schools should strive to be safe spaces which foster inter-group engagement, ensure social interaction and demystify and counter communal narratives of adversarial identities through transparent admissions, diversity in the student and teacher pool and a zero tolerance policy to communal bias and bullying[11].

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[11] Erum (2017: 213-220) gives a list of things for public schools to do to counter communal bullying.

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