

Unbecoming Citizens: Muslim Women in Calcutta

By

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Introduction

Globalisation is portrayed as the harbinger for economic emancipation, development and visibility, however, there are still many groups that not only remain invisible and outside its mandate, but are also left out of the discourse of the state and society on development at large. Muslims of Calcutta most certainly are no 'stakeholders' in the rapidly globalizing urban processes. Despite electoral visibility and considered important in the number games, large sections of Muslim population in India in general and West Bengal in particular, are found living at the margins and are often completely excluded in the government's plan of actions such as quality education and jobs. To illustrate this with numbers -West Bengal fared poorly in the Sachar Committee Report (2006) with only 1,34,972 Muslim employees in government jobs while the community's share in the population was a good 25.2%¹ and an RTI query recently revealed that Muslims' representation in Kolkata Police and the KMC (two biggest government organizations) was not even 10% despite the community constituting 25% of the state's population,². Considering that the Muslims in Bengal are largely concentrated in the urban region (Census 2001), the incidence of poverty and marginalisation is therefore much more intense in the city of Calcutta. Though urban centres are supposed to be more open and accommodating in the popular imagination, in practice a city like Calcutta is segregated (if not completely) on communal lines, forcing Muslims to concentrate in low-income areas with minimum basic services and amenities. Areas such as Topsia, Narkeldanga - Rajabazar, Kelabagan, and Metiabruz (a few important examples of Muslim ghettos wherein I've drawn upon materials for this study), are stark instances of such exclusion.

The Indian state has created and constructed an idealised notion of citizenship that is both majoritarian and male. Women's role in Indian society is paradoxical. On the one hand, she is accorded a lower/inferior status by the male guardian members of the family/society yet, on the other hand, yet she is also entrusted with the burden of the upkeep of the responsibility of the family and kinship honour. Repressed by the men of the community through means of 'symbolic violence', the Muslim women are 'conscious' *subjects* (Wolfreys 2000). Their bodies are sites of contestation – an issue brought out especially in the last few years, whenever the debate over hijab has spilled out from the 'private' to the 'public' realm through the Indian media, even when the trigger is raised in far off lands such as France or US. Given the situation, where women's negotiations in the public domain are at best overlooked and at worst trivialised, this paper seeks to delve into the discourses of the state, the community and the city of

¹ <http://www.financialexpress.com/news/bihar-delhi-west-bengal-fare-poorly-in-share-of-muslims-in-govt-jobs/187684/>

² <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/no-jobs-muslims-only-fobbed-off-in-bengal/421947/0>

Calcutta to understand how intrinsically the question of Muslim women's claim to citizenship rights is embedded within these discourses.

Given the conditions, the women of the community are certainly then doubly marginalized by virtue of being what is referred to as 'minorities within minorities'. The women here lack agency to take part in any community discourse – often being subsumed by the increasingly strengthening clutches of religious discourses set out by men of the community. Courting the Quran selectively, providing no scope for deliberation, intellectual discourse or *ijtihad*, a very conservative, subjugating and suppressive argument is built by the men of the community to keep the women away from the 'public' into the 'private' sphere. Notions of Patriarchy and Hierarchy are deeply imbedded in the imagination of most Muslim communities, though in varying degrees and much has been debated about this issue (the Shah Bano case and the debate it ensued emerges as a signpost in the modern history of India for the Muslim community as a whole). To locate women of any particular community, seeking justice, one had to understand her negotiation takes place twice. In the case of a Muslim woman, she has to bargain for her rights first as a minority Muslim and secondly as a member of the marginalized gender. My unstructured and random interviews with some 20 women and some men from the community from the above mentioned areas within Calcutta, belonging to different socio-economic strata, show that notions of justice, equity and citizenship are mostly understood by them in the context of everyday issues of access to education and jobs opportunities.

Historical Background

Since the lived realities of any group of women is located within the community they belong, this paper will begin with a brief anthropological account of the Muslims in this city and proceed to argue that these groups are 'population' (Chatterjee 2004), an empirical category distinct from citizens living in the margins of legality and illegality; and the women of the community are rendered as mere subjects with reduced capacity for self realization.

Apart from the native Bengali Muslims, large sections of Muslims who settled in Calcutta were tradesmen who migrated to the city since the eighteenth century (Siddiqui 1974) from various regions of British India – Bihar, Punjab, Dehli, UP, Kabul, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Small but significant population from erstwhile Madras Presidency and Kerala also migrated here. Since the Muslim population in Calcutta spoke diverse languages, Urdu for them emerged as an idiom borne out of economic necessity – these groups conversed in their own native languages in the private and conversed in Urdu in the bazaars. Stronger than any religious affinity was and in some cases still is the kinship ties linked to what is known as *beradris* (which are also often occupational groups equivalent to the hindu caste groups) like *syeds*, *sheikh*, *Khan*, *Ansari*, *qureshi*, *kunjra*, *kasai*, *memon*, *shamsi* etc. These social group divisions were strictly enforced with each group having their own fastidious practices and strictly remaining endogamous. Often the affluent among these groups built Mosques, Jamaatkhanas, organisations and clubs where membership was exclusively for these particular group's male members. Wajid Ali Shah,

Awadh's last nawab who was deposed by the British, was exiled in Metiabruz (south west of Calcutta) in 1856 (Nishant 2008) and his arrival marked a point of departure for the Muslim community in Calcutta. There was a desire to assimilate socially which led many Muslim city dwellers and especially the Bengali speaking for instance to give up their 'mother tongue' and adopt Urdu (a language of refinement with a promise of upward social mobility). Traces of Bengali mixed with Urdu led to the birth of a local dialect of Urdu, which is termed as *Gulabi Urdu*. Education formal and non formal in Urdu grew increasingly since then and in the 1900's quite a few Urdu medium schools sprang up in the Muslim dominated localities.

The Urdu term for the word *Citizenship* is 'Sheheriat' and the *citizen* in Urdu is termed as 'shehri' (the same expression that describes a city dweller). The Urdu term for 'civic' also is known as shehri. This little anecdote amply clarifies that citizenship among the Urdu speaking, often elite Muslims has an urban and exclusive connotation – it was more than a political space – it was a masculine civic urban space that has a resonance with the medieval understanding of citizenship (Alsayyad 2006). Citizenship or *shehriyat* then became *rather* a membership to an elite and urban society which is distinguished and opposed from the polity or what is called as 'siyaasat'. Women in the traditional understanding were outside the realm of both *shehriyat* and *siyaasat*. That is not to say that women never challenged these notions – the most famous example of Rokaiya Sekhawat Hossain who challenged these patriarchal norms of Muslim society even while observing *pardah*, is a brilliant example of such struggle to question the societal and religious sanctions, but her story is an exceptional if inspiring anecdote in the city's pre-independence history.

Based on my unstructured and informal discussions and interactions with women from various 'ghettoes' of Calcutta, and my formal interviews with some men of the community, there appears to be a notion of how the Muslims were not 'always like this'. Independence emerges as a marker in the imagination of many third and fourth generations of the Muslim city dwellers wherein began their descent into reduced visibility and bargaining powers with the government. But 6 December 1992, when Babri Masjid was brought down by the hindutvawadis, clearly marks a – a binary of 'before' and 'after' when the invisibility was made complete. There is a strong sense of neglect from the state and a growing sense of discrimination. In the absence of a strong Muslim 'leadership' and scant representation in the secular front, a reason cited by almost everyone I questioned on the issue, the sacred (what Ashis Nandy calls 'the return of the scared') is emerging as a new space where everything that affects a Muslim – both the temporal and the spiritual, is deliberated upon.

From Subjects to 'Populations'

Minority groups, it is argued are produced through negation of their claims to nation- or people-hood by the sovereign (Das 2008). But there also exists another group of minorities - what Samir Das borrowing from Agamben calls as 'bare life' minorities, the earlier category is considered safe and sanitized while the latter are ruled by suspending

the law. In the post colonial state of India, the Muslims in Calcutta as elsewhere, has been reduced from British subjects to 'population' group. With abysmal conditions of existence, and the city as their only means of survival and their identity, another dimension has emerged of late. Increasingly the city space is being appropriated by the middle / bourgeois through 'civic liberalism'³ where this class wants a sanitized city with an almost homogeneous social character and are seen protesting⁴ to get rid of such polluting (mostly Muslim) populations, especially in the wake of any terror threat or protests by Muslims (like in the issue over Tasleema causing traffics snarls in early 2008). Perhaps the on 21 November 2007 City violence could be an indicator of a perceived threat of diminishing negotiating powers of the population which chose Tasleema Nasreen as a soft target to voice this fear through violence.

The sovereign, however, effectively controls any growing particularistic demands from within the community by relevant laws and policy measures to contain such groups or sometimes, as in the case of Calcutta with lesser overt interference but a more covert surveillance (monitoring of the Friday mosque sermons, more police informers from within the community etc.) as a means to contain these 'troublemakers' within territorial confines such as ghettos. Most of these ghettos are marked as 'potentially dangerous' and with 'possible links' with the terror outfits therefore under stronger gaze from the sovereign as I found out in a visit to the police station! Added to this, is the nature of Indian citizenship - the language of citizenship that emerged in late colonial India and continued in the post colonial India was grounded in a gendered notion of the national and political community (Roy 2003). Placing these two arguments, what we see emerging in the case of the Muslim women group in Calcutta is a situation where they are criminalized by the virtue of being a 'Muslim' and further ripped of any claim making rights as they are subsumed within the community discourse and do not have the agency to build there independent discourses on the state in general and citizenship in particular. Since social and political negotiating power makes some citizens more equal than others and some people more powerful citizens, minorities and women groups as rendered as unequal partners. The conclusion that such distinctions between citizen – population - subject exists, is extensively clear from the findings of the Sachar Committee Report and, in the context of Calcutta from the extensive surveys carried out by The Institute of Objective Studies, from which I have drawn much of my empirical data. But more significant than these data and findings are my own personal experiences of growing up in a traditional Muslim household within a dense urban Muslim locality in the heart of the city - where observance of customary 'laws' developed through social practice largely guide the lives of its inhabitants rather than through any modern notions of rights (Bourdieu 1977).

Large sections of this urban population cannot be treated as legitimate citizens as their habitations as well as livelihood are premised on the violation of law (Chatterjee 2004). According to the Sachar Committee Report West Bengal has the highest percentage of

³ <http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/images/AD.pdf>

⁴ email to the editors in English city dailies are a good indicator to this fact. Also see <http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/images/AD.pdf>

Muslims at 30.2% (cumulative percentage) and has a very high incidence of urban population among Muslims at 27%. These populations' relation with the government agencies is determined on the terrain of political bargaining powers to determine how much and what can be negotiated and for how long. Three important indicators of any community's socio economic status can be measured through the indices of employment, housing and education. The Institute of Objective Studies have been carrying out surveys among the Muslims of Calcutta, who constitute a little less than 10 lac (Census 2001)⁵ of the total population of the city, including greater Calcutta, out of which an approximate 80% of this population lives in slum or slum like conditions (IOS Report nd); wherein almost all the community is clustered in areas like those mentioned above.

Occupationally, most of these are petty to very petty traders, with no security of fixed income. 80 % of Muslims are self employed, largely engaged in handicrafts and small trades- shop owners, tailors, butchers, fruit sellers and hawkers and street vendors who are trapped within a continuous cycle of employment and unemployment. The growth of unemployment and the fact that many of the younger generation has weaker ties to the labor market, once thought of as a crucial mechanism for the socialization of young adults, has further weakened an already dwindling loyalty and sense of reciprocity between the members of the population and the state. There employment rate in some select State Departments, when compared to other states is also among the lowest as pointed above, with the education and transport department having no representation at all. Only in the home department is the representation high – indeed highest among all the states at 14.1 % in higher positions. Under the socio economic indicators Calcutta's (which comes under the 100 top districts by size of Muslim population) index of social progress is 0.63%, lesser than suburban Mumbai's 64%. The literacy rate is 68.1% total among the Muslims of Kolkata of which female literacy rate is only 63.6%. (Sachar Committee Report 2006). Housing, considered as pre-requisite for any meaningful living is an index where the Muslims of Calcutta fare poorly too. Approximately 50.4 % households occupy between 66 – 100 sq ft of housing space. 15.96 % more households have a housing space of 100 – 120 sq ft. Only 5% household occupies more than 350 sq ft and above housing space. But the most alarming deficiency that the Muslims face in Calcutta is that of quality education.

Problems of Educability

The educational status or the lack of it – among the city dwelling Muslim Population can be sufficiently grasped by reading the following figures: 16.95 % can only sign, 14.19 % have received primary education, 6.23 % have studied till the secondary level and 2 % till higher secondary level. 2.75 % get their bachelors degree with only 0.17 % complete their post graduation. I will later deal with the issue of the Educability elsewhere. According to a report by IOS, 80% of Muslim population in the city is from non escalatal groups – with no potential of moving up the socio-economic status for a long time to come. Out of this population, 40% is between the age group of 6 – 20 years, i.e. in the

⁵A snapshot on Calcutta's Census data can be found here
http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Dist_File/datasheet-1917.pdf

school and college going age. That puts the figure at 4 lac. Yet only 15,000 of such youngsters are enrolled in school and 20,000 are in Makhtabs and madrassas. Only 4% of the students are enrolled in government recognized schools. 96 % are enrolled in private schools of dubious records. The scourge of lack of access to free education to the community (for every 24, 000 Urdu speaking children there is 1 government sponsored / aided school) has resulted in an unprecedented opportunity of a market for many primary schools that have that have sprung up in the last couple of decades and is growing evermore with each passing year. Even among the schools recognized by the government, the quality of teachers is not at par with other schools and vacancies are not filled sometimes for years. Though the aspiration for education is equally strong among well off as among the poor and low-income groups whom I interacted with, even the most conservative parents with moderate means desire a liberal English medium education, preferably convent schooling, but lack of access to quality education sometimes forces families to enroll in one of these dubious ones. Once in, it is like a vicious circle which often results in children opting to either become drop outs or complete their secondary education from open schools. It is a common feeling among many Muslims whom I interacted with that such deprivations faced by the community is due to strategic deprivation since the society operates in such mechanisms which retard the growth of the minority community. An instance of this was pointed out to me in an interview where I was enlightened about how it took 20 years for a private college Milli, to get permission, that too without granting it the status of minority institution. Given this grim situation, it is not just a problem of education but educability which constrains the rest to get an education. In such an environment Muslim women definitely fare much worse than their male counterpart.

It is true that girls have a greater potential of getting educated as most boys have to drop out by the time they reach high school due to economic pressure from families – a cursory head count in any Muslim cluster in Calcutta will ascertain this fact. Perhaps as a result of this, I came across a few lower income families that are encouraging their daughters to work and earn doing clerical and sales job, making use of their higher secondary or degree level educational qualification, more often than not to accumulate some money for their own marriages. But this is a new phenomenon and not altogether accepted by all families which face economic hardships.

Gendered Citizenship

Muslim Women under greater Calcutta comprise of almost 14% of the total city populace, which in itself is a big number. Comparing other metro or big cities, the Muslim women of Calcutta fare much below in all the indicators of progress. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon's book (Hasan 2004), studied some major Muslims dominated areas across the country and picked up Haora region from the east. The book furnishes us with data that tell us this simple fact. Some examples are - mean age of marriage among Muslim girls in the urban east is just around 14 years. Only 4% go on to receive a University degree or more. Only 8-9% of total Muslim women are employed in this region with most engaged in embroidery or tailoring or casual work not needing women that give them little mobility and confines them to the private space.

It is not surprising that the largest section of women in this region belong to the lower middle income and middle income groups. Within the household they have the least decision making power and very little status. These women are the subjects located within the populations, to be dealt with intermediaries. A befitting instance to illustrate this point would be to write about my experience of attending a Conference called 'Muslim Khawateen Bedaari Conference, Kolkata' (translating in English to 'A Conference towards Reforms Among Muslim Women of Calcutta', in November 2007 organized in the wake of the Sachar Committee Report. This conference was attended by the representative of the government's Minorities affair minister, Abdul Sattar, himself part of the higher echelons of the Muslim population, who promised all possible help from the government for the purpose of education for the Muslim city women. Indeed the conference found it important to have a Maulana amongst its noted speakers who spoke of how 'men were willing to allow women to go for higher studies' and any thing conforming to the ideals of Islam was welcome. There wasn't any representatives either men or women who either questioned or challenged both the minister and the Maulana. The government through these intermediaries attempts to regulate the population who in turn make its females as conforming subjects.

The emergence of the Ahle Sunnah Wal Jamaat and the Tableeghee Jamaat (the more rigid schools of thought – the former drawing sustenance from Saudi Arabia sponsored purist form of Wahhabi Islam and the latter an orthodox school having a great sway within the subcontinent and a product of the Deobandi school of thought) - the two schools whose ranks are swelling, with large scale of adherents inflecting from the different branches of Barelvi and Firangi Mahal school of thoughts, is a pointer towards this increasing trend of an absolutist religion gaining ground. Separated and demarcated into the confines of home, women find spiritual solace and social space in religious gatherings meant for women. What they learn from these gatherings instead are how to be pious Muslims and the duties that the Shari' at laid down for women. Indeed one may even catch a poster meant for the walls in many Muslim households which proclaim in beautiful calligraphy the responsibilities of Muslim women. This is not to say that duties of men in Islam do not exist, but men are the disciplinarians and the women as the subject of such disciplining. The growth of fundamentalist Islam, which aims at going back to the basics, is forcing women to assert their religious identity as Muslims and trying to annihilate their separate sexual identity or their identity as equal partners on the issues that directly affect their lives. My exchanges with Muslim women in the city made me realize that most of these women will offer blind obedience to the Shari' at law which is the final word of God for them. But there is a unanimity among them that the concept of triple Talaq should be restricted if not altogether abolished, a view reflected upon through extensive surveys in the book 'Women and Law: Muslim Personal Law Perspective', by Khan Noor Ephroz.

There do exist certain organizations, usually run by affluent and conservative Muslim women (like the West Bengal Muslim Women's Association), where the thrust is on giving vocational training to underprivileged women who can earn some income sitting at home. Most of these training institutes are run by zakat. These places also double as schools for imparting lessons on theology. In one such class, I was informed by one of the woman I interviewed, the teacher while extolling the virtue of hijab, snubbed her for wearing a sari, a *hindu* piece of clothing. Such demarcations don't initiate from the

women but from the clerics, percolating down to the ordinary Muslim women who suffers yet strives to carry the burden of her faith perfectly while trying to be a modern woman. This conflict is as much within herself as located outside her, with the members of the opposite sex.

But these women are also aware that being part of the minority community gives them the right to claims on group rights by virtue of their status. Having no power to decide what they want from the state and the city does not necessarily mean that they do not have the capability to articulate what they want. The question is - articulate to whom? - Muslim women have no means or agencies to put forward of what they envisage as their community's success story in a rapidly globalizing world. They might not demand to be made equal partners in the states scheme as they at this stage but they are aware of a collective sense of deprivation from the state due to their minority status. Minority claim on citizenship rights today call for sharing of sovereignty.⁶ The minorities have started making the claim to a share of sovereignty without breaking the states.

Post Sachar Committee Report the spurt in activities, the eagerness of the government to show its secular yet human face, but the question is how much of the welfare envisioned will be welfare for women specifically. A gender-structured approach to these issues will be instructive because it will bring out the trends affecting the fortunes of the Muslim women of the city - trends that remain obscure from much of the formal and legal discourse on citizenship for women. Given that the report has made no references on the issues of women's realities separately, this will perhaps reflect directly on the policies of the government and its calculative attempts to 'woo the minorities'. The central government has recently started mulling over providing quotas to Muslims⁷ based on the fact that caste based social stratification exists among the Muslims too (Zainuddin 2003) but the governments at all the three levels - the central, state and local, is yet to formulate its policies that are gender sensitive and gender-inclusive, policies that address the lacunae to bridge the gap between the Muslim population and their claims to citizenship rights. What perhaps can address these lacunae is a notion of 'differentiated citizenship' where the concept of citizenship accommodates both the trajectories of individual and group rights (Young 1999).

Conclusion

It would be trite to argue that the Muslim population is not ready to comprehend such differentiated citizens though most of the community members have been living under huge socio-economic duress over such a long period of time. But this doesn't necessarily mean the community views the state and the government as a constant adversary. Often legitimate economic grievances are articulated in a religious idiom or language, giving the impression that the demands are religious or communal in nature. The lack of any strong state support to the community like less political representation, dearth of jobs, deficient schools, colleges, health facilities, public spaces, good roads, proper sewerage and waste disposal etc. from the Muslim pockets in Calcutta also conversely means much less interference from the state in much of their day to day activities. Unlike in many

⁶ For a statement on the theoretical implications of shared sovereignty, see, Samaddar 2006.

⁷ http://www.telegraphindia.com/1091130/jsp/nation/story_11802123.jsp

other cities, these areas are marked by a 'semi-autonomous' characteristic where trade licenses, land regulations, building by-laws and other statutory orders are not forced upon or regulated. Further, the religious freedom this accords to the Muslims is also unparalleled in any other metropolitan cities of India. Loud speakers in mosques, cow slaughter (which is banned in many states and cities across India) during Eid –ud Zuha, night long qawwalis during Milad-un-Nabi without any apparent decibel restrictions are a few case in points. This form of governmentality can be read as a tacit contract between the state and the Muslims where those citizenship rights guaranteed by the modern liberal state might not be given to the community but the state would also give them freedom to manage their own affairs as long as they are confined within these ghettos. But by all account this delicate balance is perhaps going to change with Muslims in Calcutta vociferously demanding a dignified life as urban citizenry. The question then is where do these developments leave the women of the community? Though there is no simple answer to the question, but this is not to argue that there is no space that the city offers to these women; what it does not offer them however is a 'place' (Massey 1994) of their own which allows them to articulate or appropriate claims on citizenship rights for justice and equity in the way they deem fit. This sense of place is denied to many groups of women in general and Muslim women in particular and which has become the basis of many women's movements in India. To become respectable and equal citizens for both men and women of the community it will take immense will from the part of the sovereign to mediate with basic measures like education, housing and health. The urban is increasingly seen as an area where such contestations on such issues will emerge, the lowest level of government in the urban – the municipal bodies have to widen their scope to deal with such contestations and give equal space for all communities and women groups.

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