

# **“Interrogating Urban Closures in the South Asian City: Kolkata’s Muslim Neighbourhoods”**

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## Urban Space in South Asia

Urban spaces in South Asia have never been monolingual spaces of the kind traditionally found in Europe. Especially cities that have had a colonial past have historically been home to numerous cultural and religious groups who had migrated into them drawn by the promise that these modernizing spaces held. Consequently, these cities developed neighbourhoods coded by race and ethnic origin; and in the case of India by caste and religion. As T. B. Hansen writes, 'Certeau's notion of urban space as a vast field of undetermined social relationships and sites of potential freedom did not really exist in the colonial city' (Hansen 2013: 26). As a result, even after the end of colonial rule, claims to urban space in these cities were never really made in terms of 'right to the city' in the sense implied by Lefebvre and Harvey (Harvey 2008); but were rather premised on political sentiments mediated by shared language and cultural moorings'. The post-colonial city therefore remained segmented, with different neighbourhoods representing entirely different worlds; sites of the *known* and of *home* for those who belonged to it; and conversely as territories of the *unknown* and the *unfamiliar* to those who did not (*ibid.*).

While segmentation of the kind pointed to above continues to persist in cities of the region in myriad ways, the feature assumes particularly troubling forms in contexts where segmentation spells intrinsic inequality and disadvantage for particular religious/caste/ethnic groups which are sought to be confined within defined spaces of the urban landscape, often from the outside, by the mainstream which then attempts to lay claim on urban space in their own terms. The present paper attempts to understand the dynamics behind the persistence of such segregation, and the implications thereof, by taking up the instance of 'Muslim neighborhoods' in India's urban centres. It does so primarily drawing from data collected in the course of ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the author in the neighbourhood of Park Circus, a so-called 'Muslim neighbourhood' of Kolkata.

## **Muslim Neighbourhoods in Indian Cities: The Case of Kolkata**

While Muslim neighbourhoods based on regional and occupational affinity had been a feature of most Indian cities that were major colonial centres, these were to assume starkly communal forms given the extant communal politics between the Hindus and Muslims of the country in the years leading up to Partition and Independence in 1947. The population movements and the communal persecution of Muslims that followed in the years after led to a sharp reorganization of urban space along the lines of religious community; a process that has once again begun afresh with the intermittent outbreak of communal disturbance in cities of northern and western India in the last two or three decades (Varshney 2002, Chatterji and Mehta 2001, Gupta 2011, Jaffrelot et al, 2012). This, in most cases, has resulted in the creation of closed and restricted neighbourhoods for the cities' Muslims that are often identified and understood as 'Muslim ghettos'. Such neighbourhoods are held in general disdain by the dominant communities and are usually found to be clearly set apart from the latter's quarters by various physical and metaphorical boundaries. They also largely lack the civic and social amenities otherwise taken for granted in the more mainstream parts of cities and are usually congested and squalid owing to an acute space crunch engendered by the overcrowding of diverse Muslim groups who have gathered there in search of safety that a preponderance of numbers supposedly provide. Juhapura and Citizen Nagar in Ahmedabad, Mumbra and the 'walled' Muslim localities of Dharavi in Mumbai, Zakir Nagar in Delhi, are all instances of such Muslim neighbourhoods in Indian cities.

Given the near absence of communal outbreaks in the period after Independence, Kolkata is generally regarded to have been a far safer place for Muslims as compared to most cities in northern and western India. Nevertheless, it had been the capital of colonial Bengal which along with Punjab, were the only two states of British India that were partitioned at the time of Independence on grounds of religion. The communal politics in the region leading up to Partition, the ethnic carnage of

1946,<sup>1</sup> the large scale population upheavals that followed and the subsequent refugee resettlement<sup>2</sup> had as far back as the 1950s led to the creation of clearly discernible Muslim clusters (Bose 1965) spread across the city's geography. These small, densely populated pockets, where increasingly large numbers of diverse Muslims gathered in order to flee the fury of the dominant Hindu groups in the communally troubled years following Partition, began gradually to be squeezed into yet more crowded enclaves which eventually came to possess the distinct air of a 'ghetto' around them (Chatterji 2007). With the constant inflow of migrating Muslims from various parts of India and rural West Bengal who came in search of employment trade and education – opportunities that a rapidly expanding modern cosmopolitan city provides – they expanded and grew in prominence so that by the closing decades of the last century there were about five or six defined 'muslim neighbourhoods' in Kolkata where Muslims, who comprised nearly twenty percent of the city's population were primarily huddled. In these pockets of Muslim life, the fear of communal persecution remained alive through *memory* and *narrative* passed down by the older generations who had experienced riots first hand, so that the present generations developed a sense of self and identity premised on a definite perception of their specific history in the city. The 'insecurity' engendered by the fear of potential communal violence was rekindled once again by the riots around the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the Gujarat pogrom – a decade later – in 2002 and provided ground for a further consolidation of existing spatial/communal boundaries making them more real and more heavily patrolled than ever before.

While 'insecurity' remains a significant factor behind the formation of Muslim enclosures in Indian cities, what seems interesting are the interactions and negotiations between communities at the everyday level that are instrumental in maintaining and reifying 'boundaries' within urban space. As Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, writing in the context of sharpening boundaries between Hindus and Muslims in the region around the time of Partition writes, "This stress exclusively on the public sphere

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<sup>1</sup> Commonly known as the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946

<sup>2</sup> Here refugees refer to Hindu refugees from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh who came and settled in Kolkata in the years following Partition and Independence in 1947.

has led to the neglect of social transaction in people's quotidian lives where.....(lie) the breeches between communities (Bhattacharya 2014: 109). In the case of Kolkata in particular, the enduring anti-Muslim cultural prejudice of the Hindu Bengali-speaking middle-classes, the *bhadralok*, seems to have played an equally important role in restricting urban Muslims within communally segregated spaces. Scholars working in the area have described the ways in which the Hindu *bhadralok* had attempted to frame the city's Muslims in a pervasive language of 'otherness'<sup>3</sup> since the time of Partition and Independence in an effort to keep them away from the city's cultural and political mainstream (Chatterji 1994). The stigmatization of Muslim predominant neighbourhoods in the city, the popular cultural constructs around them and the negative description and practiced avoidance of those who live in them can be seen as an extension of the cultural prejudice of the Hindu *bhadralok* which has continued to this day and which has, in its own way, increasingly pushed Muslims to the margins of the city's social life.

Drawing on the experience of Park Circus, this paper focuses on the ongoing construction of such neighbourhoods as 'impure' and 'polluted' spaces which because of these very attributes seem to be essentially unfit to figure in the known socio-cultural landscape of a modernizing urban space. It also focuses on the lived experiences of Muslims who inhabit these configurations and the long-term implications that continued experiences of living with spatial stigma<sup>4</sup> and social exclusion might have defining notions of selfhood and difference among them. The paper argues that the idioms of 'otherness' that had got constructed around Muslims in the city since the days of heightened assertion and contestation of communal identities around the time of Partition have remained strangely resilient especially in the realm of everyday practice which gets reflected in the social arrangements in space

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<sup>3</sup> Gyanendra Pandey in his seminal essay 'Can a Muslim be an Indian?' (1999) describes the processes by which Muslims who stayed behind in India after Independence got classified as the proverbial 'other', the diametrical opposite of the mainstream Indian Hindu self in the everyday processes of democracy, outside of the official discourse of secularism.

<sup>4</sup> The term *spatial stigma* is used as an extension of Goffman's work on stigma (1963) into the study of spatial units which carry a stained identity.

observable in the city and which works to exclude a majority of members of a particular ethnic community from the rest.

### **Zones of the 'Other': *Bhadralok* Constructions of the *musholman para* (Muslim Neighbourhood) in Kolkata**

In common perception, Park Circus, or for that matter any other Muslim neighbourhood usually figures as a culturally alien social space where patterns of life are greatly different from those found in the more conventional neighbourhoods of the city.

Popular urban rhetoric functions by building upon perceived differences in the ways of life in these neighbourhoods in a manner that makes such places strange, unfamiliar and, to an extent, unacceptable to the average middle-class Hindu psyche. Within this rhetoric, Muslims, being the quintessential 'other', are seen to have constructed neighbourhoods that are 'mini Pakistans'<sup>5</sup> where people are innately aggressive, assertive, unpleasant and lacking in the commonly expected civic sensibilities that are so central to modern cosmopolitan life. Such neighbourhoods are furthermore congested, loud and full of filth all of which result from the not so developed civic sense of their resident ethnic groups. 'The *azaan* 'blares' from the mosques', 'the place reeks of garlic', 'there is beef everywhere', 'the men and women appear as though from a different world' – are the usual characterizations employed by the Hindu middle-classes to describe a culturally alien space fundamentally incompatible with the known culture spaces of their own.

Some of the most common idioms that get employed by the former to signify the vast cultural distance of the Muslims from the themselves include those of the 'opposite (*ulto*)', of 'uncleanliness' and of 'aggressive self-assertion' all of which seemingly emerge from the non-local and non-'cultured' ways of life Muslims in general are seen to subscribe to. Attributes leveled at Muslims also very naturally get

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<sup>5</sup> For the prevalence of this coinage across Indian cities see Kirmani 2013: ix

extended to mark Muslim neighbourhoods, since these are the spaces which are seen as containing such tendencies.

The language of the 'opposite', though seemingly benign, is perhaps the most forceful and persuasive way of describing the essential dissimilarity between the ways of life of the Hindus and the Muslims in the city. '*Oder toh shob kichui ulto*' which roughly translates as 'they (the Muslims) do everything in a manner contrary (to that of the Hindus)' is a common Hindu Bengali phrase used to characterize activities of Muslims. The formulation is seen to derive its validity from Muslim cultural practices that are evidently 'opposite' to those of the Hindus; for instance, while Hindus using the Devnagri script (or derivatives of it) write from left to right Muslims using Arabic write from right to left; again, while Hindus, especially those from Northern and Eastern parts of India, have taboos against marriage among parallel and cross cousins Muslims allow such marriages. However, in the everyday discourse of 'opposites' apparently benign differences in cultural practice, such as the ones mentioned above, get regularly invoked and amplified in order to signify a way of life that is vastly different from that of the Hindus; a way of life that does not follow the usual norms of conduct and hence is responsible for the moral dissimilarity and often degeneration of the Muslim mind. Middle-class Hindu Bengalis for example routinely cited marriage practices among Muslims to make the point. Several of them pointed out that Muslims can 'marry whoever they like', 'keep four wives', 'divorce one and take another without much of an issue' and so on and that their social rules were very conducive to such wayward choices. The possibility of 'difference' in cultural practice is not readily accepted; and a perceptible insensitivity to things contrary to the known and expected is evident.

The idiom of 'uncleanliness' also routinely cropped up in discussions on the cultural dissimilarity of Muslims. Muslim neighbourhoods were generally seen as squalid, filthy, unclean and unhygienic and hence aberrations in a landscape that has increasingly come to carry a more civic sense of the public (Kaviraj 1997). Hindu notions of ritual uncleanliness and taboo against the slaughter and consumption of beef plays an important role here. Given that Muslims consume beef seems to make

all food, and by extension the entire neighbourhood ritually polluted in the common urban characterization, one which should be necessarily avoided since it could contaminate by touch (Sennet 1994: 212-249; Also see Douglas 1966). For most of the Hindu middle-classes who live in the neighbourhood, or had been previously residents, or go there regularly or occasionally for business, the ubiquitous presence of beef shops, leather-factories and similarly engaged enterprises makes the place sensorily repugnant, one which they would generally stay away from had they the option to do so (Steiner [1956]2004, Appadurai 1986). This, to a large extent, explains the metaphorical if not physical boundaries that separate their residences from those of the Muslims within the neighbourhood. However, as one finds, such concerns are mostly garbed in secular reasoning and many among the former will usually cite the health risks involved in the consumption of beef, or of living in close proximity to large leather treatment factories rather than pointing to anxieties with ritual pollution as such.

A generalized notion of ritual pollution along with the fact of congestion and spilling over of domestic life into public space in overcrowded Muslim neighbourhoods across the city seems to lend credibility to the belief that Muslims are, in general, indifferent to concerns of cleanliness and hygiene. That many of them are compelled to live in such spaces, given their circumstances, is a fact that gets conveniently overlooked in these discussions.

Ingrained self-assertion and aggression are the other principal qualities routinely attributed to Muslims and Muslim neighbourhoods in the city. Park Circus is generally viewed by both the neighbourhood's as well as the wider city's Hindu middle-classes as a space in which Muslims have created their own cultural world far removed from those of their own. In popular perceptions the neighbourhood figures as an island of 'Pakistan' within India replete as it is with its mosques, its *karbala* (an open space where the local *Muharram* festivities take place), its *Pakistan Bazaar* (a local bazaar) all of which invoke images of a space culturally detached from its immediate geographical surroundings and therefore an aberration to it. 'It seems as if you are in *Lahore*-



*Karachi'* is a very common phrase used by many among the city's Hindu middle-classes to describe the interiors of the neighbourhood.

Furthermore, the existing stereotyping of the Muslim male personality as one that is essentially virulent, hostile, aggressive and rigid tends to make such spaces receptacles of unforeseen hazards and therefore dangerous and unsafe for those who are not 'insiders' to them (Chatterji 1994). Narratives of rampant crime and immorality and a subliminal suspicion of Muslims in general give further grain to such presumptions. While the perceived dangers are usually unspecified, their immediacy is apparent from the fact that an average Hindu would never venture into the neighbourhood beyond certain hours of the day or beyond some of its more accessible landmarks. When I first began my research I was repeatedly told that it was not a 'good' place; that I should always be accompanied and leave the neighbourhood before dark, at least some of its more dubious parts.

The qualities of uncleanliness, aggression and moral degeneration work together to create an image of the 'other' – and by extension of the space inhabited by the 'other' – that is spoilt, damaged and to that extent a 'problem' in the wider urban landscape. It is unfamiliar, strange and distorted, and as such very difficult to make sense of from the outside. It is therefore best contained within its own boundaries, so that it does not run the risk of contaminating the mainstream.

The average Hindu *bhadralok*, therefore, hardly has a problem so long as the Muslim remains in his/her own quarters. Such prejudice, nonetheless, becomes evident whenever a possibility of inter-mixing emerges with the latter especially at the everyday level. This perhaps explains why Muslims, however educated and affluent, would find it difficult to secure accommodation in any decent but primarily Hindu predominant neighbourhood in the city. It also explains why Muslims from the lower classes find it difficult to secure employment in the households of upper and middle-class Hindus in the city.

Thus one finds that irrespective of the reality of communal violence, especially of the kind witnessed in the cities of northern India in the recent years, Muslims in

Kolkata are destined to live together separately in pockets of their own in the city. The silent but relentless processes of social exclusion founded on cultural prejudice, which operate with unflinching tenacity in the course of everyday life, ensure that Muslims are never able to come out of their allotted spaces and intermingle with the city's mainstream. The memories of communal violence and fear of potential violence only further alienates the Muslims who feel the increasing necessity to live discretely in their own quarters in hope of security that a predominance of numbers might provide. These also reinforce the already existing cultural prejudices of the dominant group who now find a fresh legitimacy to their exclusionary practices.

### **Tribulations of Confinement and Reproduction of Prejudice**

Given the existing formulations of Muslim neighbourhoods current in the city, *all* Muslims residing in Park Circus are immediately identified as possessing a heightened consciousness of communal/religious identity that has led them to choose a 'Muslim area' as their place of residence. The fact that Muslims in the city routinely face difficulties finding accommodation in the more conventional neighbourhoods of the city due to prejudice of the dominant groups who generally oppose such intermixing, or that they might prefer leading lives in a cultural space more desirable to them are issues that get easily ignored in such formulations.

As one of my respondents, Shahid, a 26 year old software engineer from the neighbouring state of Bihar who has recently found employment in one of the upcoming technical hubs of the city residing in the Kasiabagan area of Park Circus told me,

I had initially wanted to find a place to stay nearby my place of work, but it is generally expensive, and on two occasions after much dilly dally the landlord refused to rent out the place to me because I was a Muslim....but the worst part is, after I found a suitable flat in Kasiabagan, a colleague at workplace said, 'So you too opted to stay in a ghetto? What is the use of education if you cannot get out of ghettos? Muslims are always so rigid in religious matters'.

Such narratives strengthen the preconception that Muslims, unlike Hindus, have a special affinity to their religion and culture and generally lack the open-mindedness required to move out of familiar settings and intermingle with other groups who live in the city. As such, the fact of residing in Park Circus immediately lends the Muslims an attribute of being rigid and dogmatic and hence unsuited to cosmopolitan urban life.

Sabir Ahmed's situation is a case in point. Mr. Ahmed, 38, is a doctor with a local practice. He comes from a family of *ashraf* Urdu speaking Muslims from Uttar Pradesh. His great grandfather had been a judge in the Calcutta Court. His family has stayed in Park Circus for generations in the family home and, as such, likes the life they have here. It is safe and sound and the children can grow in what Sabir considers 'the right kind of cultural milieu'. As Mr. Ahmed put it,

Why does the religious character of the neighbourhood immediately have to crop up (whenever the question of a Muslim neighbourhood is raised) ... Even Ballygunge (a posh Hindu neighbourhood towards the south of the Park Circus) has temples on every other street. But people don't immediately say 'Hindus are religious'. But Muslims always get branded in terms of the neighbourhood they stay in.

Further, cultural preconceptions about Muslim neighbourhoods get naturally extended to those who reside there. Hence all Muslims from the neighbourhood are seen to lack basic civic sensibilities, are aggressive and hostile, and definitely not ones who can be trusted in regular social intercourse. As Mr. Ahmed's wife Mrs. Sayeeda Begum tells me,

Hindus have these notions. They think Muslims like to live in filth. That is not true....it is the lower class Bihari Muslims who have no sense of cleanliness. Because so many of them are here, the neighbourhood looks filthy....but then they are illiterate, poor, and don't have jobs. Obviously they don't have any *culture*....but it is not true of Muslims in general.

While Mrs. Begum put emphasis on the difference in social status between Muslim groups and pointed to the fact that the clustering of a large number of slum

dwelling Muslims in the neighbourhood actually contributed to the negative labelling of all Muslims who lived there, Mr. Akhtar Ahmed assigned it to the wider Hindu prejudice and the clever manipulation of such prejudice by the local real estate agents. As he explained,

You see Hindus don't like living with Muslims. Here in Kolkata *Bengalis* always push Muslims away from them.....this gives rise to the tendency among Muslims to consolidate and live in groups.....Businessmen and promoters are utilizing all these sentiments to their own benefits. They lure the Hindus (residing here) into moving away and we get a bad name. See, if they (a local Hindu) can sell a flat worth six lakh for twenty, which Hindu will not take the bait? On the other hand they (the real estate managers) rope in rich Muslims, who like the comfort of living among their community members, to buy property in the area and themselves make huge profits in the bargain. This is why you won't find many Hindus here....the problem is not essentially 'communal'; local business has a very significant role to play and so has Hindu prejudice. Muslims don't find homes elsewhere so they obviously gather here.

While Muslims themselves might have their own explanations for making sense of the current negative description of the space they find themselves in, which usually has little to do with their own agency, there is nevertheless little escape from the fact they actually live in a 'Muslim *mohalla*' in the city.

Forced to live in closely bounded spaces with meagre civic amenities, most of them lead lives in settings they would hardly aspire to be in. This is particularly true in the case of the middle and the lower classes which have a more embedded sense of locality than their wealthier counterparts who can afford to look away from their immediate surroundings and participate in the cosmopolitan life of the city.

The story of Akhtar Hussain is a case in point. Hussain, 53, had come to Kolkata way back in the 1980's from a village in Murshidabad in north Bengal in search of employment and currently runs a small leather business from his house on Bright Street. Even though his two sons have grown up and have started working in call centres and his business is doing better than ever before, Mr. Hussain cannot afford to

leave the tin roofed two-room house that his family occupies. As Mr. Hussain explained,

Do you see the condition I live in? My sons feel ashamed to invite their friends home. We can afford to live in a much better place, but Hindus don't somehow like to live with us. We have searched for homes in many decent neighbourhoods, but they either ask exorbitant rates or say they cannot rent out their homes to Muslims.

The predicament of the upwardly mobile middle-class Muslim is particularly evident. Professor Karim, who lives on Jhowtalla Lane adjacent to the large Kasiabagan slum expresses his anxieties about his son growing up in the neighbourhood. As he put it,

My son studies in St. Lawrence, which is a prestigious boys' school in the city. But the *para* he is growing up in is not good. The streets are full of lumpen elements....only slum children play in the streets. We cannot allow our son to mingle with them...he will pick up bad things (from them) and go astray.

Mr. Karim has instead put his son in various extracurricular activities to keep him engaged during his hours off school.

Abdul, a 26 year old research fellow at a reputed university in New Delhi and an erstwhile resident of Park Circus recounts similar fears on part of his own parents when he was growing up in the neighbourhood in the 1990s.

We were never allowed to play with the Kasiabagan boys. I and my brother were allowed to play cricket in the *maidan* only on Sunday mornings when there was a coach, but never in the evenings after school with the local children. Our parents would be very strict about that. We also had to come back home by six in the evening.....We grew up watching TV instead.

The restrictive effects of social confinement become relevant here. In spite of equivalent occupations or income, the Muslim middle-classes are hardly able to lead the life that a Hindu *bhadralok* in a similar situation usually can. Differences in capabilities become immediately evident. A typical middle-class Muslim from Park

Circus, holding a respectable government position might, in terms of income and taste, be at par with any Hindu *bhadralok* in the city. However in several aspects of everyday life the person would not be able to enjoy the comforts and possibilities his or her Hindu counterpart can. He or she would normally have to live in a building close to or in the fringes of one of the many slum settlements of the neighbourhood, would have to put up with the filth and dirt that living in an overtly congested locality entails, be quiet about the fewer civic amenities available and so on. A child from such a family might go to a good school, but would normally not have the kind of playmates a child from a Hindu family living in a more mainstream and culturally homogeneous neighbourhood can. Again, middle-class parents would be restrictive about the movements of their children and confine them indoors since public spaces available for outdoor activities are usually taken over by the lower classes, especially the slum dwellers and their children. There is little one can do to overcome these, and the most pragmatic way of coping seems to lie in maintaining a careful distance from the *other* while ensuring that this does not, in any way, lead to animosity between the two groups. The middle-classes and the slum-dwellers of Park Circus, therefore, seem to lead separate lives, within an enclosure which has for the larger part been forced upon them; an attribute which reflects in the sharply fractured social space of the neighbourhood.

The lower middle-classes and the slum dwellers, on the other hand, have their own share of vulnerabilities to deal with. Being socially and economically marginalized from the mainstream and shunned by the more fortunate of their own community these groups are all the more susceptible to the tribulations that living in a stigmatized neighbourhood entails.

In recent times, some of the large slum stretches in the eastern fringes of the neighbourhood have, in addition to criminality, been identified as important centres for sheltering terrorists in the city. Consequently slum dwellers routinely come under the police scanner, which often causes unnecessary complication and harassment in everyday life. Slum homes are often subject to police raids and local Muslim youth

taken to custody at the slightest sign of trouble. As Mr Haroun, a local committee secretary of a prominent political party in Tiljala told me,

See this is a Muslim *bustee*. If there is any trouble, even a small fight (within the slum or with the neighbouring Hindu slum) Muslim youth are the first to get picked up. It is as if it is only Muslims who create trouble....that is why I always tell the lads to settle matters quietly.

Ever since a house on Dilkhusha Street was found to have sheltered terrorists, matters have worsened for the locals. But local Muslims are very conscious about what they perceive as the difference between terrorism and reaction to issues that overtly hurt religious sentiments. Mr. Haroun, for instance, put it this way,

Nobody likes terrorists. They are a threat to everyone....but defending yourself when someone is hurting your religious sentiment or insulting the Prophet is different.....But that doesn't mean that Muslims are always eager to fight and cause trouble....one should keep the context in mind.

Nevertheless, the anxieties that the neighbourhood's association with criminality and terrorism bring about, get reflected in more everyday matters. For example, inhabitants of the neighbourhood are routinely looked upon with suspicion and usually declined employment in Hindu establishments in the city.

As Dawood, 23, who works as a hand in a Hindu commercial enterprise (obviously by suppressing his real name and address) in the southern part of the city, echoing the sentiments of several local youth, told me,

Outsiders consider those from Tiljala to be intrinsically engaged in crime and other anti-social activities....They don't think that they can trust us. Nowadays (referring to the arrest of a Muslim terrorist from the area a few years back) they think terrorists live here. I would never have got this job if they knew I was from Tiljala.

In the course of my fieldwork, I had also met several Muslim women in the neighbourhood who worked as maids/helping hands in Hindu families under assumed Hindu names, donning vermilion and conch shell bangles, markers of married Hindu

Bengali women, in order to fake their identities and find employment within an urban economy which is replete with biases towards Muslims.

The lower and lower-middle classes face other everyday difficulties as well. Given the social profile of the neighbourhood, most banks and financial institutions have put parts of it on the black list which makes it difficult for locals to get credit in times of need. Instead they have to depend on private agencies who issue loans which require heavy guarantees and exorbitant interest rates.

Again being located in a space which falls within the prime commercial area of the city and is composed primarily of the affluent and upper-middle classes, the poor find themselves more of an aberration in an otherwise sanitized urban space. For instance, local facilities such as markets, schools, transport, healthcare, entertainment fall way beyond the means of the average Muslim. As Reshma Begum, (39), of Ayenapara described,

Here you will find everything, good shops, restaurants....but you also have to be able to afford them. Nothing here is for the ordinary Muslims. It is all for the rich. Back home (in Chitpur in the northern fringe of the city) you can get good *biryani* for 30-35 rupees. Here you won't find anything for less than 80 rupees. How is one supposed to feed guests?

Rents in the area are usually sky-high. Apart from those who are old tenants or live in government requisition flats, ordinary Muslims who come in from rural areas or other regions of the country find it extremely difficult to find affordable accommodation. Even a tiny one-room shanty house with a common bathroom shared by four/five families costs about two to three thousand rupees, depending on its location, which is way beyond the means of a lower-class Muslim. On the other hand, accommodations, reasonably acceptable to the middle class families, cost way above the prevailing market rates elsewhere in the city and cuts deep into their pockets. While there is a sense of comfort in residing in a known cultural space, for a large section of Muslims the decision to stay in the neighbourhood more a result of compulsion than deliberate choice.



The twin facts of social exclusion and fear of communal violence appear to play an important role here. While the latter induces Muslims in increasing numbers to opt for housing in the neighbourhood in spite of the financial difficulties the decision entails, the former ensures that such Muslims find it difficult to find housing in the more viable localities such as those on the fringes of the city where the cost of living is lower and which are principally occupied by the Hindu lower classes. Life is indeed depressing for large numbers of this section of the locality's Muslims who increasingly find even the most mundane things slipping through their grip as they try to come to terms with a rapidly changing urban economy.

### **Conclusion: Space and Identity in a Muslim Neighbourhood**

Even though the larger section of Muslims residing in Park Circus seem to aim for a mainstream urban living they nevertheless continue to find it hard to escape the relentless branding of Muslims as the quintessential *other* in the city's social life. Thus, irrespective of the multiple identifications<sup>6</sup> that a Muslim in the city might take on contextually, he or she gets immediately categorized as a 'Muslim' first, before anything else. Such an approach not only overlooks the fact that identities are 'robustly plural' (Sen 2006: 19) and that 'the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others (*ibid.*), but also takes away from those so labelled any agency or choice they might have had in prioritizing one of their many identities over the other. It also glosses over the fact that identities are shifting categories that are situationally invoked, often in response to the other at any given point in time (See Butler 1993: 105). This often results in the valorisation of one aspect of identity, in this case religious identity, over all other competing ones as the defining feature of an individual's personality. Innate Muslimness becomes the underlining factor which is used to explain behavioural patterns and choices of all Muslims in the city.

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<sup>6</sup>According to Brubaker and Cooper 'identification' is a more apt term than 'identity' since it connotes a process rather than a fixed essence. An individual is constantly called upon to identify—'to characterize oneself, to locate oneself vis-à-vis known others, to situate oneself in a narrative, to place oneself in a category' in various contexts (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 14).

One aspect of such imposition of identity that appears to be particularly relevant here is the way in which continued experiences of spatial confinement from the outside, works to impress a pre-given identity on the neighbourhood's Muslims which more often than not seem to be in conflict with the perceptions and images that they carry regarding themselves. Thus, whereas a young software engineer might prefer to view himself as a modern youth in urban India, the fact that he lives in Park Circus immediately renders him an inward-looking, orthodox Muslim who prefers the comfort of a communal space than the liberating anonymity of a cosmopolitan city. Again, while a highly educated middle-class Muslim would prefer a liberal milieu for his children to grow up in, he is forced to reside in a negatively defined 'communal' space which once again holds the potential of perpetuating among their peers the reality of their Muslimness more than anything else.

While the middle and upper middle classes among the Muslims can still escape the debilitating effects of spatial confinement to a certain extent given their generally higher level of social capital, the situation is particularly deplorable for the lower classes, specially the slum dwellers, who have to deal with the repercussions of a stigmatized social and spatial identity in almost every aspect of their everyday lives. Thus a Muslim youth in Tiljala does not only have to deal with the attribution of a dogmatic personality, he also finds it difficult to find suitable employment given the prevailing negative attribution of the neighbourhood he comes from; furthermore, he would be more susceptible to indifference and even harassment from the authorities than someone who is not a Muslim and is from a more reputable neighbourhood.

While in the field, it was often pointed out to me by Hindus and Muslims alike that there has been an increasing tendency towards the adoption of the Islamic way of life across social classes among Muslims in Park Circus. The last few years have also seen a rapid increase in the number of Sunni Jama'ats in the neighbourhood and two schools imparting Islamic education along with the more conventional courses had come up. Whereas local Hindus prefer to view it as a blatant assertion of communal space on part of the Muslims, this also leads one to the rather disturbing realization that continued experiences of marginalization can in turn induce excluded groups into

a reverse assertion of identity from within themselves drawing on their own symbols which then results in the congealing of boundaries, this time from within the community in question.

Whether the Muslims of Kolkata can become part of the mainstream or are destined to live separately in excluded spaces of their own depends on the extent to which the Hindu middle classes in the city, the majority as it gets termed, are able to accept them and facilitate their smooth transition to the mainstream of the city's social life. The existing situation, nonetheless, reminds one of one of the inevitable realities of South Asian cities where there has not been a smooth transition to cosmopolitanism but rather, as Hansen puts it, a 'fragmentation of taste regimes' (Hansen 2013: 33) where different ethnic communities increasingly live side by side but within deeply fragmented spaces of the cityscape.

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