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Dwelling in the city: Socio-spatial dynamics of gendered and religious embodiment of young Muslim women in Delhi, India

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Abstract

This paper examines the intimate relationship among gender, religion, and the urban with a special focus on Muslim women in Delhi, India. Drawing on interviews conducted with young, middle-class, unmarried Muslim women, this paper demonstrates that Muslim women's lived experiences of religion and gender are often complex and situated at the intersections of embodied spatial practices of religion, gender and urban-ness. Predominant understanding of Indian Muslim women focuses on their gendered religious enactments such as *purdah* (veiling), oppression by Muslim men, and their need to be 'rescued' from Islamic systems of oppression. However, these narratives do not fully capture the complexity of Muslim women's embodied experiences and encounters with the urban. In turn, this paper investigates how Muslim women's experiences of the urban unfold at the interstices of gendered and religious geographies of the self, families/faith community, and the city in *everyday life* and *exceptional contexts*. I argue that the intersection of gender, religion and the city is nuanced, ad-hoc, and paradoxically shift and change within the historical socio-spatial urban context of Delhi.

Keywords: Gender, Religion, City, Embodiment, Delhi

Introduction

Gender, religion and the urban are deeply intertwined, coproduced and embedded in everyday life. On one hand, gender and religion as integral domains of everyday life shape how urban dwellers, especially women, inhabit the city. The urban, on the other hand, provides space for and shapes gendered and religious embodiments through its social, spatial, and political constellations. Recognising that gender, religion and the urban each are contested and multifaceted experiences, this paper explores the relationship among gender, religion and the urban, by locating them in the specificities of Muslim women's lives in Delhi, India. It examines how gender and religion produce pluralities of structures, relationships, emotions and possibilities of being in the city, and consequently shape the urban in varieties of ways. Drawing on young, unmarried, middle-class Muslim women's experiences, agency and subjectivities in Delhi I discuss: (a) how Muslim women define and enact their relationships with the urban mediated through both gendered and religious expectations and practices; and (b) how, more specifically, the gendered-religious-urban relationship is paved through plural and flexible imaginaries and practices of the self, family, friends and the politics of the contested city itself. In turn, the paper centralises the identities, subjectivities and agency of Muslim women as expressed in a range of urban practices in Delhi.

Muslim women occupy complex social, political, and spatial locations in India. Dominant State and media narratives construct Muslim women as a bound and homogenous category oppressed by religious-gendered power relations. These constructs provide "disproportionate weightage ... to the impact of religion and personal law" that governs issues of marriage, divorce and inheritance, and silences Muslim women's embodied experiences (Khan, 2007: 1527). There is also an "Orientalist fascination" with issues like *purdah*/veiling and 'oppression' of Muslim women by Muslim men (Kirmani, 2013: 9; see also Gupta et al., 2020; Datta, 2021). These narratives on one hand construct Muslim women as subservient, "abject", "helpless" women in need of saving by the State from "violent" Muslim men in the country, and on the other hand, assist the State and other dominant social forces to heighten securitisation practices against Muslim men and Muslim communities (Gupta et al., 2020:8; see also (Anand, 2005).

However, Muslim women's embodied experiences and practices presented in this paper demonstrate that these narratives are not stable and/or totalising. Instead, Muslim women often find ways to engage with the city on their own terms, and in doing so, they potentially modify discourses around gender, religion and the urban. Drawing on feminist theorisations of the body and embodiment (Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1992; Thapan, 2009), this paper thus challenges fixed narratives of Muslim women as 'passive victims' by centralising their practices as

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active, coproducing and socio-politically embedded heterogeneous urban actors.

The body and embodiment are central to feminist analyses of the urban. The body is a material reality *and* a discursive construct (Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1992; Longhurst, 2001). The ways in which bodies are situated are central to power relations in cities (Grosz, 1992). On the one hand, bodies have biological, i.e., material roots, and on the other hand, bodies come into being only through discursive and cultural meanings attached to them (Butler, 1993). The discursive *and* material aspects of the body are thus interconnected (Longhurst, 2001). Feminist scholars also argue for a reflexive understanding of the body that moves away from mind-body dualism proposed by René Descartes (Bordo, 1986). Instead, feminist research centralises embodiment as a concept to emphasize mind-body interconnection, and the importance of understanding gendered bodily experiences as an expression of and as a tool to resist social relations that enforce material and ideological power through the body. In other words, embodiment as a concept focuses on “lived experiences related to identity, power, location, and materiality as personally and individually known ... and manifested in bodily sensations and emotions” (Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021:1505) as experienced by Muslim women. Researching embodiment, in turn, demonstrates that identities, social interactions and power relations are not deterministic but processual and take form with active participation of women. A focus on embodiment also allows us to understand gendered and religious constructions and expressions of belonging in the city.

Religion has a significant role in shaping contemporary Delhi through processes of violence, historical religious relations, sense of conviviality among religious communities and practices of assertion of religious identities by communities through protests (see section 5 for detailed discussion). Delhi is also undergoing significant neoliberal urban transformations. Many scholars have noted that neoliberalisation of the urban political economy alters the relationship between gender and the city, especially for middle-class women which the participants are a part of (Bhatt et al., 2010; Belliappa, 2013; Mount, 2017). Neoliberalisation often position middle-class women as active beneficiaries, drivers and participants of neoliberal urban modernity through gendered, classed and aspirational “consumer citizenship” (Fernandes, 2004; see also Bhatt et al., 2010; Belliappa, 2013; Mount, 2017). Middle-class women are also increasingly participating in the city for paid work, politics, consumption and leisure activities (Oza, 2013).

The lives and embodied experiences of the Muslim women presented in this paper are shaped by these broad trends. Segregated Muslim neighbourhoods, despite their internal socio-economic-political heterogeneity, continue to perpetuate gendered religious moral codes such as veiling and restricted mobilities within its geographies (Jaffrelot & Gayer, 2012:213). Contrarily, non-Muslim neighbourhoods limit women’s opportunities to undertake religious practices. At the same time, the participants find opportunities for education, paid employment, pleasure and social networks in the city. Such engagements with the city provide the participants with a sense of emancipation and autonomy that are fairly similar with the experiences of women from similar class backgrounds. In turn, participants generally view the city in a positive light, and shape women’s sense of self and identities as existing research on gender and the Indian city demonstrate (see Phadke et al., 2009). The urban, gender and religion are thus intertwined and coproduce one another in complex manner and that is the focus of this paper.

The paper is divided into five sections. The following section lays out the conceptual framing i.e., feminist understanding of gender, body and embodiment in the city. This section is followed by a discussion on methodological aspects of the research. The proceeding section focuses on the context and role of religion in urban India, with a particular emphasis on Muslim communities. I also evaluate research on Muslim women’s urban experiences in this section. I then analyse the participants’ embodied experiences of gender, religion and the city, and their effect on Muslim women’s subjectivities in the city before presenting the

concluding section. The conclusion draws out the major arguments of the paper that Muslim women’s embodied experiences emerge at the interstices of the city, community, and subjective sense of self. Their experiences demonstrate that the city is a complex socio-spatial-political entity and is produced through Muslim women’s negotiations of socio-spatial constraints and opportunities that are often defined by gendered, religious and urban relations of power.

Gendered religious embodiment in the city: A conceptual framing

Feminist scholars draw on embodiment as a foundational concept in the analyses of the urban. They argue that the body and embodiment are central to how women access and experiences the city. The body is central to the maintenance of cultural, social and political regulations over a community; and women are often ‘pushed’ to conform to bodily practices that maintain dominant power relations (Abraham, 2010; Butcher, 2018; Darwin, 2018; Endelstein, 2013).

Yet, women also undertake certain practices to stake claims to the city. The ways in which bodies are enacted in/through urban spaces produce opportunities for identification and differentiation for instance with communities, ideologies and supposed location. Embodied practices like veiling, decorum, how one talks or walks in public space (Secor, 2002; Pain et al., 2005; Phadke, 2013), how one manoeuvres spatial-temporal boundaries (Paul, 2011) and at times one’s (non)conformity to expected gendered social norms can all produce differential opportunities (or lack thereof) and (im)possibilities for the gendered appropriation of the city. For instance, Butcher (2018) demonstrates that women consciously move through practices of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ to deal with various social and spatial “enclosures” placed by the Indian city. These practices also demonstrate women’s reflexive understanding of their lived environment in deciding which aspects of control are to be accepted or rejected. When many women use these tactics to claim the city, their tactics assumes collective and resistive meaning as they seek to alter the terms of urban engagements.

Feminist research further demonstrates that bodily presence in urban spaces is a prerequisite for women’s claims to urban citizenship, justice and equality (Fenster, 2006; Phadke et al., 2009; van den Berg & Chevalier, 2018). Being present and participating in urban spaces and everyday life is often seen as one’s claims to the “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1996). Collective and overt resistance to exclusionary practices that rely on bodies is also central to the reimagination of the city. Bodies occupy spaces, bodies become sites of resistive practices and articulations of dissent as women sing, dance, and march. Women’s lived experiences of the urban are thus as much about the material body as its discursive location.

This paper builds on these feminist analyses to argue that gendered religious experiences of the urban are dynamic, complex and processual. Religion has a “direct grip” *especially* on women’s bodies through various practices such as clothing, prayer and other performances of piety (Fenster, 2007:42–43, emphasis mine). Gendered religious practices are also fundamental, for instance, to state functionality around geopolitics, modernity, secularism, citizenship, and by extension can produce many forms of surveillance of religious communities (Gupta et al., 2020). Current debates around the ban on veiling by Muslim women under the guise of national security and secularism in European countries are also a case in point (Burchardt et al., 2015; Gustavsson et al., 2016). Thus, the regulation of the (gendered and religious) body has been central to the maintenance of power, be it of the state, municipal authorities, community and/or members of the public. As a result, a focus on religious and gendered embodiment enables the inclusion of lived experiences of Muslim women in the understanding of the complex intersection of gender, religion and the urban. A focus on embodiment also disrupts notions of passivity in women’s experiences of gender, religion and the city.

Methodology

Data for this paper were collected in two sets. The first set was collected during 2017-18 as part of a larger project on gendered violence in public spaces of Delhi, India. During this phase, data was collected using face-to-face in-depth interviews, participant observations and walking-in-the-city method to gain in-depth understanding of women's socio-spatial practices in the city. The second set of data was collected in 2019-2020 to update the original dataset, with a special focus on Muslim women. Data was collected using in-depth Skype interviews in order to maintain social distancing protocols of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this phase, I also participated in on-going protests to develop ethnographic insights into Muslim women's political engagements in Delhi.

Participants were drawn from the age group between 25 and 30 years. This age range was chosen to ensure that the participants have some level of unsupervised access to diverse spaces for education, employment and community related activities in the city. Existing research demonstrates that women's participation in the city facilitate in the development of identities and sense of self. Furthermore, as Kirmani (2013: 179) argues, Muslim women's ability to "bargain" (Kandiyoti, 1988) within patriarchal systems changes with age and income. Such changes help women in developing subjectivities and identities in independent manner which have significant effect on their relationships, belief systems and use of the city. Furthermore, the participants are from middle-class backgrounds, with some levels of university education, income and mobility in Delhi. These combined factors helped the participants develop political awareness, access, and engagement with activist and academic spaces in Delhi, as evident in the paper.

In addition to class, care was taken to include Muslim women from different caste, locational, and migration backgrounds. During the interviews, however, it became clear that caste did not influence the women as much as other identities. Caste was often invisible compared to identities of religion, gender, and class which are embodied in much more visible ways. Class status also often masked caste locations through practices of consumptions, occupations, living arrangements and access to the city. However, caste status became apparent when the women interacted with other urban dwellers and crucial information such as names were shared. For instance, inter-caste dynamics complicate inter-caste marriages and relationships within the city (Mody, 2008; Datta, 2016) but such experiences were often not considered important enough by the participants when discussing the city.

My relationship with the participants is framed through my complex positionalities as insider-outsider in Delhi. I am a Muslim (non-practicing) migrant woman who has lived in Delhi for more than a decade with significant periods of out-migration. I am an insider in terms of my social relations, understanding of socio-political contexts of the city and its dwellers. However, I am also an outsider owing to my migration trajectories and identification as a non-practicing Muslim. I was able to develop close connections and rapport with the participants due to my insiderness. My age also helped in developing a generational affinity with the participants. Yet, as a non-practicing migrant Muslim woman I often found myself limited in my capacity to understand the complex place religion holds in Muslim women's lives in Delhi. This led to deeper discussions of not just gendered and religious experiences in the city but also of faith and Islamic ways of life. I thus occupy a complex positionality vis a vis the research participants in Delhi where religion is increasingly being constructed as normative and primary identity with significant influence on socio-spatial interactions in the city.

Gender, religion, and the (Indian) city

Contemporary Indian cities are complex, contested and evolving in their physical, socio-political and economic makeup, and so are the nature, meanings, and usage of these cities. Indian cities like Delhi are deeply influenced by social-cultural and political differences, colonial

legacies, and contemporary urban development driven by globalised imaginations, policies and governance practices. As a result, Indian cities exhibit multiple spatialities, temporalities, and experiences that build on and contribute to the (re)production of intersectional identities and differences such as gender and religion.

Research on the role of religion in urban societies and everyday urban life remains nascent despite the existence of a rich diversity of research on religion and religious histories in India (Chaudhuri, 2022). Nonetheless, the influence of religion on Indian cities can be evidenced in multiple ways. One of the most overt ways in which religion has influenced Indian cities is through violence and exclusion. Religious riots have had tremendous impacts on urban socio-spatial fabric. The British colonial rule, which divided the society that eventual led to the partition of India along religious lines, has resulted in long lasting legacies of fear and distrust towards Muslim communities (Datta, 2021; Jamil, 2017; Robinson, 1998). The most significant riots in post-independence India, if one can place these violent eruptions on a comparative scale at all, which influenced urban socio-spatialities happened after the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalists in 1992, which paved the way for the construction of a Ram (a Hindu god) temple in Ayodhya city, Uttar Pradesh in 2020. These riots were reported across South Asia with "greatest intensity of consequences reserved for cities" (Narayanan, 2015:4). Over the years, Hindu-Muslim riots have shaped many Indian cities and towns like Ahmedabad (2002), Varansi (1992), Mumbai (1992), Delhi (1984, 2020), Nagaon (1983), to name a few. Religious violence does not only reshape religious identities but also reconfigure urban spaces through multiple cascading effects like out-migration of communities, rehabilitation practices, formation of segregated neighbourhoods, reorganisation of borders and loss of community and belongingness worsening existing fault lines (see Arif, 2008; Engineer, 1992; Jaffrelot & Gayer, 2012; Jamil, 2017; Mustafa, 2020).

However, Srinivas (2012:70) argues that the focus on religious violence is a predictable lens which neglects how religion plays out through a range of "religious imagination and practices" in urban India. Following this line of argument, De (2022:198) focuses on the emergence of convivial spaces in Ahmedabad, Gujarat – a city torn apart by Hindu-Muslim riots – in urban spaces marked by "challenges of living together" with material, social, cultural and moral differences of religious practices and identities. These "convivial spaces", De (*ibid*:205) argues, are "inherently fluid, messy and contradictory" where "possibilities of transgression and compliance" of religious boundaries coexist and are negotiated, making cities liveable for both Muslims and Hindus "together but separately". Chaudhuri (2022:5) argues that "everyday religion" inscribes itself on urban India by reclaiming the streets in two ways: (a) permanent or semi-permanent insertion of religion into everyday spaces such as placing of idols on pavements and (b) ephemeral celebration of religious festivals. Through these practices religion is "commoditised at one level and becomes an ideological instrument at another" (Chaudhuri, 2022:5). Focusing on the Durga Puja in Kolkata, Guha-Thakurta (2022:109) demonstrates that the city and the Goddess Durga are deeply interlinked as the city shapes the festival and the festival shapes the "specific urbanity of Kolkata's streets and localities". Religion also plays a critical role in the emergence and thriving of cities in India. Cities are also built to fulfil religious needs, for instance, during Kumbh Mela which brings together millions of devotees from across the country every twelve years and make non-permanent changes to the urban landscape (Mehrotra, 2017). Lately, religion has also been considered as a key "concern" for urban planning in cities like Jaipur which, Narayanan (2015) argues reflect sacred Hindu topologies.

Evidently, religion assumes a highly political, publicly asserted, geographically visible, socially divisive as well as unifying force in Indian cities. Religious practices, discourses, value systems, conflicts, commonalities, inter-religious relationships and convivial community life all lead to the production of unique urban spaces, urban design, built environments, neighbourhoods, and people's sense of place in India

(Narayanan, 2015:5; see also Chatterjee, 2011). Religion thus is an uneasy, often conflict-ridden, yet everyday part of urban life in India.

Existing analyses of Muslim women's experiences of the urban focus predominantly on their experiences, subjective positions and embodiment of religious marginalisation by situating the urban within the broader context of the Nation. Writing against the backdrop of post-1947 partition religious riots in Delhi, Datta (2021: 396) argues that the religious riots significantly reshaped Delhi and reified "colonialist, nationalist and post-colonialist" discourses in the "agenda of the state to downplay Muslims as citizens" through fear, segregation, loss of space, homes and social connections. These discourses marginalised any expression of "agency" by Muslim women (*ibid*). Yet, "Muslim women were not merely silent spectators to the changing dynamics" of the city and their lives but "exercised agency and claimed spaces" in everyday urban issues of, say, immobility and economic engagement despite the imposition of patriarchal gender norms (*ibid*:395).

Many scholars further demonstrate that Muslim women's experiences of gender, religion and the city are intertwined with the question of the Nation, given the history of marginalisation of the Muslim community in India. Khan (2007) focusing on Mumbai argues that Muslim women's access and usage of urban public spaces is affected by their religious minority status although their usage of the city is similar to other women. For instance, Muslim women experience greater degrees of policing and restrictions because of religious violence-led ghettoisation and marginalisation of Muslims as a community into specific urban geographies (Khan, 2007). As a result of such geographical demarcations of Muslim and non-Muslim areas, Muslim women undergo different forms of socio-spatial policing both from within and outside the Muslim community in the city. Violence against Muslims also heightens gendered notions of *izzat* (respect) and *purdah* (veiling) in everyday life which in turn affect Muslim women's mobility, life choices like employment, access to services like healthcare and education, and access to the city (Datta, 2021; Desai & Temsah, 2014; Khan, 2007; Kirmani, 2009). Kirmanni (2013:168) argues that Muslim women's experiences of the city are not only shaped by their "precariousness of position" but also by their "social locations" which are "continuously shifting according to context". Drawing on Kandiyoti's concept of "the patriarchal bargain" (1988), Kirmani (*ibid*:170) further argues for the need to understand Muslim women as "actors negotiating within a web of multiple gendered social systems". Focusing on both Muslim and Hindu women in Jaipur, Narayanan (2015:22) demonstrates that women's agency and everyday engagements in the city often "support cohesive multireligious" relationships despite historical forms of control, violence and animosity.

Muslim women thus play a critical role in shaping gendered urban practices and spaces. Phadke et al. (2011) demonstrate that Muslim women find opportunities to have fun despite the constraints and violences they face in Mumbai. Similarly, Kirmani (2013) argues that Muslim women experience a relative sense of freedom despite the constraints imposed by notions of *izzat* and *purdah* in Delhi. These opportunities to develop positive experiences and practices through "practical strateg[ies] and panache" are central to gendered religious enactments in urban life (Phadke et al., 2011: 120).

The urban thus emerges as a key site of gendered-religious experiences in India. On one hand, violence and exclusions deeply shape the city and gender-religious relations. On the other hand, Muslim women find ways to assert their agency and shape their experiences of the urban. Concurrently, gender, religion and the urban are relationally produced through discourses and politics of the Nation-state and minoritisation of Muslims in India. As a result, the ways in which Muslim women experience and negotiate their space in the city often draw on these broader and relational politics of the Nation, city, community, and subjective sense of self.

Research conducted in Western urban contexts demonstrates that Muslim women experience Islamophobic and anti-migrant sentiments in their urban encounters (Listerborn, 2015; Perry 2014; Wijntuin &

Koster, 2018; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2014). Embodied religious practices such as veiling make Muslim women hyper-visible and 'exceptional' users of the urban, which shape these women's encounters with other urban dwellers in everyday life. Listerborn (2015), for example, demonstrates that *hijab*-wearing Muslim women in Malmö, Sweden undergo various gendered xenophobic and Islamophobic violence that are often under-noticed in mainstream discourses on nationalism and violence against Muslims. On a similar note, Mason-Bish and Zempi (2019: 521) argue that "veiled Muslim women are at an increased risk of street harassment in the current political and economic climate" in the UK. As a result, Muslim women often modify the ways in which they engage with the city based on their experiences and perceptions of violence. Najib and Hopkins (2019) argue that many Muslim women reinvent their mobility patterns to accommodate growing Islamophobic discrimination in everyday urban life.

Contrary to these hostile experiences, many scholars argue that while embodied practices like veiling can be an instrument of constraint, they can also make urban spaces more accessible, depending on the context. Secor (2002) writes in the context of Istanbul where veiling allows women to produce a sense of purpose, respectability and thus safe access to the city. Muslim women's embodied practices of religion are thus urban "spatial practices" (Secor, 2002). Gökırsel (2009), also writing in the context of Istanbul, argues that veiling as a gendered embodied spatial practice produce complex subjectivities and gendered bodies within the intersecting context of secularism and religion.

Building on this existing literature, this paper brings attention to the messy context of interweaving and evolving embodiment of gender, religion and the urban as Muslim women negotiate, appropriate and lay claims to their place in Delhi. I demonstrate in the next section that the gendered-religious-urban embodiment of Muslim women are shaped by practices undertaken at the interstices of the family, friends, neighbourhoods, urban politics, and individual aspirations. As a result, I argue, embodied intersections among gender, religion and the city are much more nuanced, ad-hoc, complex and paradoxical that shift and change within the socio-spatial-temporal context wherein gender and religion are invoked.

Embodied experiences of young Muslim women in Delhi

Religion has played a significant role in the making of contemporary Delhi. The city is famous for its 'Islamic' image rooted in its history as the Mughal capital and reflected in its built and social-political environments (Legg, 2006). However, Muslims, which constitute 12.8 per cent of the city's total population (Census of India, 2011), occupy contested social-political position. The city has witnessed multiple instances of religious violence, most recently in February 2020. Over the years, segregated Muslim neighbourhoods have developed in response to violence, exclusion and fear (Jaffrelot & Gayer, 2012; Jamil, 2017; Kirmani, 2013). Outside these enclaves, issues such as denial of housing to Muslims, objections to food habits especially eating of beef and calls for prayers further consolidate the need to segregate (Datta & Pathania, 2016). As the political capital of India, Delhi also emerges as a stage to assert religious identities evident in protests and collective actions like the Shaheen Bagh protests in 2019–2020 for equality in citizenship rights of Muslims in India (see Mustafa, 2020).

Religion is thus deeply embedded in urban spaces. It is intimately enacted through the gendered body, which occupies different socio-spatialities at different times. In turn, the ways in which gender and religion are experienced also shift and change. The participants of this research identified as Muslim, but not necessarily as religious. Some of the women practice religion moderately, and others do not. Only, three of the twenty women interviewed for the research wear the *hijab* occasionally in public spaces. The three women who wear *hijab* make that choice depending on the social-spatial context. All the women agree that they enjoy a certain level of freedom as unmarried, educated women in terms of their family's pressure to undertake bodily religious practices

like the *hijab* or performing *namaaz* (prayers) daily. In other words, these women presented themselves as liberal in their attitudes and practices of religion. Yet, all the women enact certain religious practices contextually in their urban lives. For instance, Meher, describes how she undertakes differential bodily practices depending on the neighbourhood dynamics she lives in. Meher describes:

"It [religion] does affect ... but it depends. When I was in Old Delhi, I used to wear kurta-pyjama¹ on Fridays to show respect for the older people going to the *namaaz*. After we moved out [to a heterogeneous neighbourhood], I do not have to do that. But I would still not wear very revealing clothes" (Meher, 30 years).

Meher grew up in Old Delhi, a traditional Muslim neighbourhood where the famous Jama Masjid (mosque) is located. Old Delhi was a walled city and former capital of Mughal empire known as *Sahjahanabad*. With its dense, winding alleys and heavily mixed-use public spaces, *Shahjahanabad* holds on to its historical identity despite its evolving social-spatial status in the city (Jamil, 2017; Legg, 2006). Meher's work as a journalist at a major national daily with frequent nightshifts compels her to wear clothes like jeans and shirt, which she considers to be comfortable to move around. Yet, because of the nature of the neighbourhood and the presence of the mosque which attracts devotees from across the city, Meher considers the kurta-pyjama and dupatta (shawl) as a necessary embodiment of respect towards the *namaaz*-goers on Fridays. Meher's narratives demonstrate how certain bodily practices take shape at the intersection of community and neighbourhood level religious histories and gendered expectations. The participants living in a religiously homogenous Muslim neighbourhood often felt more inclined to undertake bodily practices that reveal their conformity to gendered religiosity.

Contrarily, some women who live in heterogeneous neighbourhood feel "awkward" (Jerin, 28 years) to comply with embodied practices such as veiling that expressed their religious identities overtly. Jerin, who works as a part-time researcher at one of the universities in Delhi, feels awkward to stand out as a Muslim in her predominantly non-Muslim neighbourhood where she and her family have spent majority of their lives. Contrarily, Zebunissa, a graduate student living in a Muslim-dominant enclave, points out that she feels "connected to religion" because of her neighbourhood, confirming previous research (Jaffrelot & Gayer, 2012). Zebunissa points out:

"My entire society is a Muslim society, so we have Iftar parties in Ramadan, and we have Eid mela where you can buy clothes, we have a mosque. My neighbours and people allow me to be more connected to religion; I feel without them it would just be constricted to my family" (Zebunissa, 25 years)

While the participants read these practices as part of their 'choices' in the city, it is evident that their choices are often limited by gendered and religious expectations of women at the neighbourhood level. While none of the participants could tell me about probable consequences of non-conformity to these bodily enactments, they also did not mention any form of resistance to these practices. Many participants claim that they have a choice around bodily practice. However, the participants' narratives suggest that these are not autonomous choices but are largely predefined by gendered power relations in the city. All the participants learnt and enacted bodily practices and other norms as children and practice them into adulthood. Consequently, they do not have much control over the rules of religious embodiment. Meher shares with me:

"There were certain things I could not do in Old Delhi ... Girls were not considered good being out. There was no open space also. So, I

could not learn cycling, but the boys did, as they could go out. Besides [my family] was concerned about safety." (Meher, 30 years)

Meher's story demonstrates how constraints are often imposed on young female bodies. It is also evident in the case of Meher that embodied religious practices are deeply connected to gendered expectations, respect and shame. Discourses on female vulnerability, family honour, stigma, shame, and women's responsibility in maintaining their 'respectability' are deeply embedded in Indian societies (Phadke, 2005; Kirmani, 2013; Bernroider, 2018; Butcher, 2018; Hussein, 2017; Parikh, 2018). These discourses circulated widely through various social-political institutions produce gendered subjectivities that are simultaneously perceived as 'risky' and 'at risk'. Meher's experiences as a Muslim child, and later as an adult woman, expose how gendered religious norms are reinforced by using 'safety' as a key issue in the city.

While the participants confirm that there are embodied ways of being a Muslim woman in Delhi, they also point to the complexity of these enactments and gendered urban experiences. They challenge the notion that all Muslim women undertake similar bodily practices and interact with the city all the time in similar ways. Instead, their narratives suggest that there is no one way of being a Muslim woman, thus defying any form of essentialisation of the category of "Muslim women" or "the gendered religious city". Instead, their accounts point to how their relationship with the city is contingent upon multiple factors located both within their families, neighbourhoods, the city and aspirations of the self. For instance, Ruhi, a part-time university educator, shares how her veiling practices have evolved over the years to accommodate the demands of complex socio-spatialities and her desires to fashion a life of her own. Ruhi lived in Aligarh – a city in North India with distinct Islamic culture – before migrating to Delhi a decade ago. Ruhi tells me:

"When I migrated to Delhi, I changed a lot. In Aligarh it was a very religious environment. We were not allowed to travel, go outside and all ... do *namaaz*, wear *burqa*, read the *Quran*, all that [were practiced]. All that changed when I moved to Delhi. Everything is far here. I had to travel for work. There is no time to do *namaaz* or read the *Quran*. I did not want to wear the *burqa* anymore. People observe [when wearing the *burqa* in public space]. Plus, it's hot here once I even fainted [while wearing the *burqa*]. So, I gave it up. I had to negotiate a lot with my family about this. I like not wearing it now, but I still wear the *hijab* at times when I visit religious places" (Ruhi, 33 years).

Faiza, a graduate student at a local university, confirmed that there is no one way of being a "Muslim woman". She is of the view that Muslim women in Delhi are often put under the "microscope" and evaluated for their minority status and associated notions of "being oppressed by their own men". However, Faiza pointed to the ways in which her life has been about making "informed choices" based on the religious education that her mother has imparted on her, her understanding of the social context she has grown up in, and what the city provides to women like her. This is a similar line of argument all the participants make, wherein they emphasize the role family members play, mostly mothers, in religious upbringing and yet their independence or choice in choosing what to follow. Faiza points out:

"My mom is the teacher [of religious norms]. From my childhood she taught me how to be a good Muslim not just a good human [being]. My father did not play much role in this. [Mom] taught me how to blend religion in everyday life rather the becoming inflexible" (Faiza, 25 years)

Continuing the discussion on her mother's teachings on Islam, Faiza caveats her narratives with an example of how she blends religious practices and her personal aspirations of urban living.

"I am free to visit any place. I can go to parties and bars as well. But the problem is I cannot drink [alcohol] or eat [non-halal] non-veg

¹ An Indian two-piece dress with a top tunic called the kurta and bottoms called pajama.

there. That is sometimes difficult [to negotiate]. Some of my friends do not like it. They think I am conservative, not open, but it is my religious belief, and I am entitled to keep them. But I have two very close [non-Muslim] friends. When they are there, they defend me. But yeah, these things reduce my possibilities of participating in some activities with some people" (Faiza, 25 years)

Faiza demonstrates how the choices she is afforded by her family require to be renegotiated and often in a reverse manner in public spaces. She chooses to uphold her religious practices, with the support of her closest friends, by avoiding certain consumption practices that are contrary to her religious beliefs and in turn create a sense of openness and inclusion for herself in the city. Faiza considers her participation in these activities to be important for her networks, sense of belonging in her peer community and the city, which also helps her uphold a more 'liberal' identity required for her graduate life. These spaces are also sites of middle-class desires and aspirations for many which represent the globalising nature of the city and its inhabitants (see also Brosius, 2010; Srivastava, 2009). These are spaces that allow particular forms of participation in the city and the world, develop friendships, lifestyles, supposedly progressive attitudes, while being able to maintain certain religious practices. What is pivotal here is how religious practices and performances play out in urban aspirational spaces and how they constrain and/or promote particular gendered and religious subjectivities and practices in the city. While Faiza's family approves of her freedom to hang-out in spaces like the bar, their consent for her participation in real consumption of food and beverages remains contingent upon her judgment. The Muslim female body is thus not entirely out of place or excluded but is carefully managed and adjusted to the context and spaces. In this context, the individual self, the family and the city intersect in plural and intimate ways.

These accounts demonstrate how the body remains a site for the inscription of religious and gendered norms and practices, and yet it is often malleable to the needs of the women and the context. This malleability of norms and practices provides the Muslim women with a sense of choice, independence and control over their urban interactions. These gendered notions of choice and independence are crucial for these women when it comes to the relationship that they develop with the city.

Furthermore, the imaginaries of Delhi as a space of neoliberal growth, opportunities and world-classness fuel and complicate Muslim women's aspirations and appropriation of the city. As discussed earlier, middle-class women are often positioned in the neoliberal economy as active consumer citizens (Fernandes, 2004; Belliappa, 2013). Within this classed and gendered context, the malleability of religious embodiment and identities and the expression of one's urban 'self' go hand in hand.

In addition to these practices, a few participants pointed to an important aspect of their appropriation of the city, that is, how contestations and politics for religious inclusion shape Muslim women's urban aspirations and practices in Delhi. In other words, the focus here is on how the city and its religious politics itself shape gendered and religious desires and experiences. This aspect became prominent in the interviews conducted in 2019–2020 when the city witnessed a long struggle by Muslim women, popularly referred to as the Shaheen Bagh protests, to claim the rights and belonging of the community in the Indian nation. The Shaheen Bagh protests have been dubbed as a one-of-a-kind expression of the Muslim community's demands for their equal rights to the Indian nation (Mustafa, 2020; Ghertner & Govil, 2020). The protests emerged after a police crackdown on a student-led protest in Jamia Milia Islamia University, a Muslim minority institution, against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019. The Act grants citizenship to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian immigrants except for Muslims (Mustafa, 2020). The exclusion of Muslims from the Act is considered a threat to citizenship rights of the community and as a step closer to the making of the Hindutva nation by the current populist government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party. The Shaheen Bagh protests emerged as one of the major sites where issues of religion,

secularism and citizenship were debated not just by Muslim women but also by women from other religious and ethnic backgrounds who demonstrated their support and solidarity. The protests were forcefully disintegrated by the Delhi Police in March 2020 right before the national lockdown imposed to control the Covid-19 pandemic. The women who participated in the research in 2019–2020 revealed different degrees of engagement with these protests through direct support and solidarities. In turn, they expressed a renewed sense of self and a change in how they perceive their identities as Muslim women, and their role in the community and in the city. Zebunnisa and Faiza spell out these changes poignantly:

"There was a huge crowd but peaceful. The aura of the place [was] so positive. There was no sign of violence ... It was an amazing experience to be a part of something which no one could point out negatively. Everything [was] done constitutionally ... Being there showed me how strong my community is and [that] the idea of 'violent Muslims' is not true. We were just there, sitting and raising our voices against what is happening in the society. There was a certain sense of pride ... I felt it was an awakening experience, it was great. All of us came back with glistening eyes. It made us strong and made us want to own the city." (Zebunnisa, 25 years)

"[The Shaheen Bagh protest] was amazing, to see Muslim women from underprivileged backgrounds protesting. There was an eclectic vibe ... It gave me hope. I felt open to claim my identity [as a Muslim]. I used to be cautious, careful [to express my identity]. Now I won't wait for others to find out my religion [instead express my Muslim identity]. So, I have become much more expressive of my religious beliefs in public." (Faiza, 25 years)

While it is still unclear how participants like Zebunnisa and Faiza would appropriate the city in alternative ways in the aftermath of their participation in the protests in the post-pandemic years, their narratives demonstrate the importance of urban politics and activism in shaping gendered and religious subjectivities and identities. The changes in identities and subjectivities also potentially create possibilities for alternative practices in the city. Furthermore, their narratives demonstrate how Muslim female bodies are not just a product of cultural norms and relationships rooted in familiar spaces of the family/friends/neighbourhoods but also of contestations and politics in the city. While protests are not everyday practices of urban dwelling, these spectacular moments do have the capacity to ignite and shape changes to everyday ways of being in the city. As Anderson and Fenton (2008: 76) argue "the presence of hope heralds the possibility that the spatial/temporal here and now *may* become otherwise (whether hope is for a change from, or continuation of, that here and now)". Similarly, the Shaheen Bagh protests created hope for the participants to claim their identities as Muslim women in the city.

The sense of empowerment that the participants felt in the context of the community-level politics is also a reminder of how Muslim women's appropriations of the city are not only individual experiences, but also rooted at the intersections of public-private, individual-community, inter- and intra-community relations and the religious-political makeup of the city itself. The ways in which they assume their position in the city change with the diverse social-political environment and spatio-temporalities of the city.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated how Muslim women define and enact their relationship with the urban through pluralities of relationships, spaces and temporalities. By focusing on gendered religious embodiment in different urban contexts, this paper demonstrated that Muslim women in Delhi incorporate a myriad of embodied practices that take place at the interstices of the self, family, neighbourhood, friendship networks and the city. The narratives presented in the paper also

point to the complexity of Muslim women's interactions with the city as they occupy, negotiate and navigate through gendered, religious and urban norms and exclusions. I demonstrated how factors like family norms, relationships, neighbourhood level dynamics, and individual sense of self determine women's religious bodily enactments. At the same time, I also argued for the need to understand how wider politics of religion, gender and the urban become central to Muslim women's appropriations of the city. Thus, being *Muslim* and *women* are not merely markers of cultural identities in Delhi, instead, they shape and influence embodiment, identities and subjectivities in a complex manner. In other words, Muslim women's interactions with the city are not the result of religious cultures and norms alone. Instead, Muslim women's interactions with the city are shaped by pluralities of complex processes, events and people which are inherently relational.

Delhi is a city fraught with historically complex and often competing socio-cultural-spatial formations and religious political context. The middle-class unmarried Muslim women presented in this paper are located within this context which shape their interactions with the city. Consequently, I argue that these women's experiences of religion, gender and the urban must be understood within the broader context of Muslim communities' religious, social and political location in the city, gendered expectations of women in their families and communities as well as how these women locate and envision themselves in the city. These interconnections take shape in and through public and private spaces and are as much about the family, friends, neighbourhoods and the city as about the self. By locating religious and gendered embodiment in different spaces and temporalities, this paper further avoided the homogenisation of gendered and religious experiences of Muslim women in the city, allowing the author to focus on the different trajectories of these women's lives. Such an understanding is also crucial to moving away from essentialisation of Muslim women as mere victims and only as part of the religious intra-group power dynamic. Instead, a focus on Muslim women's embodied interactions establishes them as active, reflexive and independent urban actors.

The urban, in turn, assumes a paradoxical position in these women's lives. Evidently, the city remains central to Muslim women's everyday lives and struggles to claim a stake in the Indian nation. In turn, the ways in which these women develop relationships with people and places within the city, identities and subjectivities hold meanings and importance in the ways in which religion and gender are understood, practiced and imagined. This is, however, a process that is ever-evolving and thus remains unstable and contested. The ways in which Muslim women position themselves in the city in turn is an evolving process and defies forms of essentialisation and fixity.

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