BUTCHER BASTI AND ITS WOMEN: EXPLORING SPACE AND GENDER IN A MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN DARJEELING

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INTRODUCTION

The central location of this study is a area of the Darjeeling Hills, a notorious place called 'Butcher Basti', where nothing is private. The men and women of this exotic land are full of tales about their pretences of religious adherence along with a voracious appetite for gossip. They speak a funny language which is so amusing that it has earned itself a term of its own: *butcheriya*,[1] a mix of Urdu and Nepali, which sounds perverse to other cultured bipeds. To convey its 'real' spirit with onomatopoeic accuracy or refer to anything else that is closely or remotely linked with the place, butcheriya serves as a delicious term of reference. Superstitions and squalor shape society in this universe. Ask any native of the Hills and you may get an inkling of the reputation that marks the basti. I was born and raised here by my father of Bihari descent for the first 15 years of my life.

This paper seeks to examine how men and women in the basti imagine public space and the underlying gender assumptions that contribute to their conception of this public space. It brings in the voices of women to understand how they access, contest, and negotiate their public image that corresponds directly with their conduct in the public space. It emphasises on the themes of domesticity and religion as experiences that act as a catalytic and an inhibitory factor for these women in terms of public space and visibility. The paper also shows how religion and gender intersect in forming notions of space among this community. Based on interviews conducted through semi-structured questionnaires and oral testimonies by women, this narrative explores themes of domesticity and religion questioning whether or not these factors shape women's subjectivity in the realm of the public sphere in any way.

General lack of primary sources makes it challenging to construct the history of the Muslims of Darjeeling and more so because important archival papers in the municipality were lost in the fire that consumed the building in 1996. There are few secondary resources, making it even more difficult to trace the historic experiences of the women of the basti. Thus, relying on inherited memories and current practices through the voices of women, this paper explores the socio-cultural landscape in which these women are located. The paper also problematises the discourse on the use of the term 'Nepali Muslims' to understand whether or not inter-religious interactions produce inter-cultural syncretism by looking particularly at the Muslim women's public life. My own experiences of having been brought up in the basti made me include my own experiences with the aim of enhancing the narrative and also for supporting the empirical analysis that drives this study. However, the general objective of this research has not been compromised by my own learned biases, and the testimonies collected from the residents of the basti take precedence in shaping the discourse and re-examining my own opinions.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Darjeeling conjures appealing visuals in the minds of people who have lived there or people who know about this picturesque hill station crowned by the Kanchenjunga. Its highly coveted tea and sought-after missionary schools have made it a popular town. It was an extremely curious revelation for me to learn about the historically international status that my 'remote' hometown enjoyed. It had played a major role in the flourishing of the British colonial enterprise in Bengal and in India at large. As a hill station that provided a sanitorium to colonial officials from the scorching heat of Bengal in summers, Darjeeling became inextricably linked with the colonial apparatus: crucial for its economy with its tea and timber industries and militarily advantageous due to its strategic location at the crossroads of the Himalayan frontier. The colonial town planning resulted in ghettoisation as the upper reaches of the Hills were segregated for the colonial ruling elite and the lower parts of town were consciously reserved for incoming migrant-labourers from the plains of India and Nepal. This was done to maintain the exclusivity of the high society that the British were trying to replicate in the Hills.

The present-day ordering is not entirely atypical of that hierarchy wherein a finer state of life prevails as one scales uphill from the bazaar and vice versa. The demographic outcome of the gradual inhabiting of Darjeeling Hills had far-reaching socio-economic implications that are felt even today.

Locating Our Women: Ethnicity and Women's Role in Islamification in the Hills

Legendary claims of Muslims having inhabited the Hills since the times of the Delhi Sultanate have been marked by Anup Shekhar Chakraborty and Rajib Chatterjee, two scholars who have attempted to study the Muslim communities in Darjeeling. However, the residents give no weight to these claims. From the accounts of British officials

like O'Malley, who compiled a volume on Darjeeling at the turn of the 19th century, we understand that by 1901, '[The] Mohammedans formed less than 4 percent of the population, most of them being residents of the Tarai where many of the aboriginals have embraced Islam.' Origins of their permanent domicile can be located in the migratory history of labour in Darjeeling. The flourishing colonial township had been at the crossroads of trans-Himalayan trade before its annexation by the British. Muslim merchants, ethnically Kashmiris, had been engaged in facilitating trade from the Eastern Himalayan network connecting Patna, Benares, and Calcutta to Nepal and Tibet. However, after Darjeeling was acquired by the British, the demand for labour in various occupations including as tailors, sweepers, butchers, carpenters, servants, tea-workers, masons, and for more skilled and semi-skilled work attracted migrants from the neighbouring plains of Nepal and Bengal. Moreover, there were a considerable number of Muslim soldiers in the British East India Company in Bengal who settled in Darjeeling. These non-familial migrants subsequently married native women from diverse tribes and ethnicities, which resulted in the flourishing of the local Muslim community and descendants of such marriages are referred to as *thembars* or hybrids.

Anjuman-E-Islamia, a welfare organisation for Muslims was formed in 1850, the same year that the Darjeeling municipality was established. The adjoining masjid, known as Bara Masjid, is speculated to have been built around 1851-62 by Barun Roy. According to him, the mosque first appears in a map prepared by a certain Colonel Sherwills in 1862. Irrespective of the lack of an exact date for the mosque, its construction points to the emergence of a settled Muslim community in the Hills. Anjuman's creation supports the fact that a number of Muslim officials were serving the colonial establishment in Darjeeling. One such official was Dr Khan Bahadur Abdul Aziz who was employed as a veteran surgeon and later as the commissioner of the municipality. The main road of the basti has been named after him in honour of his numerous contributions to the development of the Muslim community in Butcher Basti. The girls' Maktab was founded

by him in 1910 to encourage primary education among Muslim women. Since female Muslims were originally locals, we can speculate that by the time the girls' Maktab was founded, a significant number of intermarriages had already taken place. This further corroborates that male Muslim migrants had started settling in Darjeeling around the time of colonial inhabitation there, marking their influx from 1835 onwards when Darjeeling was acquired by Captain Lloyd from the king of Sikkim. Similar trends of intermarriages were observed in the neighbouring hamlet in Kalimpong where 'Muslims from the plains sat with their hill wives.'

Diversity in the Muslim community of Darjeeling can be identified specifically in terms of their ethnicity. Apart from that, there are other signifiers that distinguish Muslims of different persuasions depending on their affiliation to different theological schools and their cultural and occupational practices. Rajib Chakraborty has categorised four major groups of Muslims based on their ethnicity with diverse economic practices respectively. The Tibetan Muslims entered India from Tibet following the 1959 Tibetan uprising. They too have Kashmiri origins and gradually settled in Lhasa from the 17th century onwards, facilitating trade along the Himalayas. They had frequented the Darjeeling-Kalimpong circuit, but they only settled in the Darjeeling Hills after 1960. Non-Tibetanised Kashmiri Muslims had inhabited Darjeeling since the inception of the colonial establishment in the Hills, trading mainly in pashmina. Intermarriages with native women were relatively low among them, and third-generation Kashmiri women also followed their husbands and migrated to Darjeeling.

The other category of Muslims is Bihari Muslims who flocked from the Tarai and mainly dealt in small-scale trade occupations. The fourth category of the Muslims of Butcher Basti is identified as the Nepali Muslims, and they are engaged in small-scale skilled and semi-skilled labour. These four groups primarily belong to the Sunni sect of Islam irrespective of their ethnicity. Sufi affiliations can be identified among three groups with the exception of the Tibetan Muslims. It is the group identified as the Nepali Muslims that forms the focus of this study as

they are mainly enclaved in Butcher Basti with a handful of families living in Lebong.

The term Nepali Muslims has been assigned by scholars on the basis of their early history of intermarriages. It is interesting to note that the basti*'s* society does not consider itself as Nepali Muslims. While acknowledging their mixed heritage, they emphatically assert that they are different from the Nepalis by virtue of religion. This categorisation while accounting for the role of native women in the indigenisation of early Muslim men furthers the discourse of cultural syncretism. Although indigenisation of the subsequent Muslim population revealed itself in their adopting the Nepali language, their morphological features, and their caste-based identifications, there are no current signifiers of their cultural assimilation in the Nepali community.

What about the Islamisation of native women who were taken as wives? An outcome was that, in terms of acculturation, it was almost unilaterally the women who underwent conversions and assimilated into Islam. Lack of sources regarding the lives of these early women thwart our attempt to shed light on how they culturally influenced the Muslim families. The butcheriya language could be a result of this.

For some reason, I visualise Nepali-speaking mothers trying to converse with their children in Urdu while themselves learning to do so. However, this conclusion has no verifiable evidence. Expressions of solidarity with the wider Nepali community, politically or otherwise, is explained in terms of their shared local history as Paharis.

Butcher Basti: The Emergence of an Enclave

All the scenic and sanitary spots in any town or city where one may find well-behaved ladies and gentlemen and hospitable natives become representative of that town. Any newcomer who has only been to these public spaces, which are groomed and maintained specifically to host tourists, has been deprived of knowing the heart and soul of that town or city. Certainly, the heart and soul of a place must also include its

nooks and corners, the crammed, the neglected, the dark and the dingy settings that do not understandably qualify as souvenir worthy. As one descends from the bazaar towards the nether parts of the town along Aruna Lama Road one can unmistakably locate oneself in the basti owing to the presence of Chhoti Masjid, the smaller of the two mosques in the main town. No evidence exists as to the establishment of this mosque. One may also ascertain one's arrival in the basti as soon as one starts spotting children running amok, screaming in butcheriya Urdu, dupatta clad women screaming at their children's nuisance, and regularly-dressed men looking after their shops.

There can be no subtle encounter with this place. The palpability of finding oneself here is not merely the distinctive aura and the cacophony that one is faced with but also because of the ordinary fact that women living here suddenly appear different from the crowd in the bazaar. The conservatism of their appearance, the rusticity of their language, and the free and easy demeanour they embody are hard not to take notice of.

The name Butcher Basti is indicative of the occupation that most of the men living here practise. The slaughter house located below the Llyod Botanical Garden was built to supply European demand for meat and is speculated to have been built after the formation of the Darjeeling municipality. They are meat sellers who provide halaal beef and mutton to the fairly non-vegetarian people of Darjeeling, thanks to the considerable presence of meat-eating Buddhists in the Hills besides the Muslim community. Prolonged historical interaction with Hindu natives has marked an influence of occupation-based organisation among the Nepali Muslims that assigns them to a particular *jati*. The people who are involved in the meat industry are called the *jat* Quresh who have continued to practise their ancestral occupations. Other prominent occupation-based segments are the Mansuris or Dhunias who are weavers and the Darzis or tailors. But there is no mention whether these jati characteristics are a result of acculturation of prolonged co-existence with the Nepali Hindu community or an outcome of marrying native women.

Through the reading of available history, we can understand that the concentration of Muslims in the basti is not a result of forced segregation. It can be identified as an enclave wherein the inhabitants themselves have converged over the years instead of a ghetto, which would imply that their clustering was imposed by forms of enforced marginalisation. Such a formulation is possible as Muslims tend to converge and settle around a mosque, which remains central in their communal consciousness and collective identity. Congregations in the mosque for prayers fall under the domain of public duties among believing Muslims (Devji 1991). On the other hand, ghettoisation can occur when highly segregated spaces are based on communal or caste lines and 'over time, what started as a "ghetto" through forced relegation might attract new residents towards it who see it much more as an "enclave" and vice versa' (Susewind 2017). The implications of such processes of segregation can have lasting consequences, and the underlying structures that continue to stagnate the socioeconomic mobility of the basti's residents should be analysed in this context. According to a study, some conditions that have sustained the continuing ghettoisation of Muslim communities in India and that are relevant for this paper are their economic disadvantages owing to their occupations as low-skilled labourers and educational backwardness due to lack of adequate funding, compounded by the fact that the more accessible and accepted madrasa education's objective is limited primarily to religious instruction (Mobin 2016). These conditions further make ghettoised communities vulnerable to stigmatisation and being underresourced.

For instance, as Feroza Aunty, a 47-year-old resident testified, after the COVID-19 pandemic, rumours that the virus was spreading to the Hills because of the living conditions in the locality abounded. Such features have been identified in Butcher Basti irrespective of its historical and voluntary self-segregation, and how these processes bear on the women living here needs to be examined.

DIFFERENT SPACES FOR WOMEN: DOMESTICITY AND EDUCATION

The experiences of the women in the basti explicate how the private-female and the public-male dichotomy is re-imagined in different contexts and situations. Such an attempt to problematise space and gender is a rich and emerging field of inquiry flourishing in academia. This departure from viewing private and public spheres as definite realms has enabled us to approach socio-cultural practices in meaningful ways. The housing arrangements in the basti are mostly subsidised rented properties overseen by the Anjuman, which is registered with the Wakf Board in Kolkata. Thus, the spatial configuration arising out of the clustered nature of the households subverts the fixed categories of the public and the private. The families in the basti are mostly joint families with multi-generational members sharing small spaces. Doors and windows often remain open for ventilation and to dispel suspicions; I think the cautionary idiom 'walls have ears' was first uttered in Butcher Basti. Furthermore, it is rather convenient to have obsolete latched doors remain open, owing to the frequent ins-and-outs of several family members and other people throughout the day. This also means that the luxury of being able to retreat into a safe 'private' space is afforded only by those women who have bigger homes. For the rest of them, the household itself ceases to be a sanctuary where they can potentially suspend their norms related to their bodies and behaviour. It becomes a pseudo-private space where they still have to be mindful of their behaviour.

The women of the basti fulfil all the domestic and extra-domestic roles in the community irrespective of their age. Women look after their children and other family members, cook, clean, fetch water, and keep the house in order. Young female members who go to school are encouraged to help at home. Men, apart from their earning activities, also extend help. All those domains where 'papers' are involved belong to them. Older women hardly go to banks or deal with matters where

money is to be exchanged, except for handling the purse for domestic needs (Chatterjee 2015). The acute shortage of water in Darjeeling has compelled women of the basti to walk to communal water springs to supplement the barely sufficient municipal water supply, and sometimes male members are coaxed into sharing this burden. Small spaces usually without verandahs mean thresholds crossed where domestic chores can be extended even to the lanes. Proper sanitation facilities also require many families to share public toilets and lay their washed sheets in the lanes. Some women even help their husbands with their businesses by looking after the shops, a practice which is not observed among Kashmiri Muslim and Bihari Muslim families. Therefore, obligations of ordinary livelihood make social interactions a natural reality.

For women, this space where interactions take place, which is neither wholly public nor wholly private, creates a precarious terrain where they are vulnerable to scrutiny and where they must exercise caution in their conduct while fulfilling their domestic duties. Conversely, the collective appropriation of communal spaces for routinised activities and the close-knit nature of ghettoised habitation has fostered a strong sense of solidarity among the people. This familiarity and sense of togetherness has assigned the basti a 'private' safe space where women face no grave danger, physically or otherwise. Thus, we see a random mixing of genders all over the place. Sometimes sharing resources may translate into shouting matches leading to animosities. Gossip cliques, which mostly include women, can result in mudslinging and brutal character assassinations. When such battle lines are drawn among families, daughters, not exclusively, of each side are often implicated and their personal qualities, educational achievements, dating history, and public conduct can become advantageous ammunition.

When it comes to crossing the boundaries of the basti, we start to see gender anxieties, especially regarding women's movement. The accepted curfew for young boys and girls for the last two generations has been *maghrib* time when dusk is announced with a call for the day's

fourth prayer. Two young men explained to me how their whereabouts during the day are almost always excused but they also feel the pressure of returning home by maghrib. Mothers and grandmothers fret for the safety of their girls not only from predatory men or mortal harm in the sunless outdoor but also from predatory and opportunistic *jinns.* There is a belief in the basti that malevolent jinns wait for attractive women to abduct them from the mortal world. Such beliefs are imbued with sexual overtones, which have led some women to believe that flowing hair and perfumed bodies fall victim to these jinns. Gulshan Fatima, my aunt who grew up in the basti before she was married, cautioned me for my scepticism, *'Abhi bhi log manta hai, shaam ka time mein sambhal kar chalna chaiye' (*People still believe that one should tread carefully in twilight).

The ambivalent force that religion exerts in this society is evident in the day-to-day lives of men and women where they make negotiations with the prescribed Islamic norms related to public space and women. Fortunately, there has been no incidence of any such abduction.

Khawateem

Khawateem means womankind. It can be understood as sisterhood. In the basti, khawateem is an informally-organised group of women who are actively involved in religious and community affairs. This includes community service. By virtue of her seniority, a 62-year-old woman universally known as Eran Phuppu who has lived all her life in the basti should have been made a representative of the khawateem. However, she acknowledged that the Anjuman-e-Islamia is a male-dominated place; 99 per cent of its seats are for men. She added that she was neither literate nor educated, so she would never be considered for any leadership position. There are hardly five or six women who have been given consultative positions in the Anjuman. I wondered what qualified them to be able to participate in the Anjuman. Eran Phuppu clarified that women who were visible in the khawateem were invited by the men to 'give' their suggestions in matters of importance.

Among the khawateem, there are some women religious scholars who organise *ijtema*, a gathering where they deliver speeches on religious topics and discuss important religious matters. Spiritual and religious fulfilment are sought in these gatherings by the women of the basti and large number of women attend them. When I attended the ijtema years ago, I was overwhelmed by the genuine fervour among the women to discuss and learn about their religion. More often than not, the whole atmosphere was illuminated by the hijab-clad women with spotless white or bright dupattas wrapped around their heads. The scent of rosewater and incense even now potently reminds me of those times and transports me to the basti. Here, in their comfortable space, free to express themselves uninhibitedly, it felt as though these women could fully realise their potential. With no male Imam to mansplain them if *khey*[2] were to be uttered through the epiglottis or if a certain alphabet was to be pronounced as *duaad* or *zuaad*, the women could deliberate on whether applying nail polish after one had performed ablution was permissible and if resuming to offer *namaz* during the seven days of their menstruation would be okay. In this gentle and warm space, despite its solemn aura, we would manage to steal some laughter and cheerfulness after the monotony of a sheer religious overload.

A 49-year-old khawateem sister who has read the *hadith* and other religious manuals is one of the rare religious educators who has been presiding over ijtema sessions. There she delivers lessons from the hadith on a number of issues and stories from the Prophet's life. For her the importance of women's private and public conduct has been 'written down for the benefit of women'. According to her, religious instructions, which are gravely lacking among women, are crucial not only to come closer to Allah but also to be able to gain direct access to the scriptures. By doing so, women can read and verify how easy it can become to live a meaningful *deeni*[3] life. Kismat Khatoon, another khawateem member who is well-learned in religious scriptures emphasised that religious as well as secular education is gravely wanting among the young people in the basti, especially girls. She reiterated that

there is a need for the women of the basti to represent themselves and admitted that she has been voicing her opinions in the Anjuman and representing the Muslim community to the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration. *'Haan par yehi hai ki hum log jahan bhi jayein tehzeeb se jayein, apna sar mein dupatta salwar kameez pehen ke jayein. Isse hum logka pehchaan hoga ki humlog Mussalman hai kyun ki hum logka aur kaafir ka libaz mein fark hai'* (Only this is abiding that wherever we must go, we must go with dignity, with our headscarves, our salwar kameez, which is a mark of our identity as Muslims, distinguishing us from the way non-Muslims dress).

The pursuit of community service and entering public life in more dynamic ways than just the religious sphere is not a tacit aspiration. Women here have been actively seeking to make their mark in places of authority as representatives of the Islamic community, and they source their mark of identity in religious terms. Since I knew that Nasreen Khatoon had been a significant member of the khawateem and was one among many who laid great emphasis on *purdah*, I asked her if she could share her views on this. Purdah, according to her, was *sunnat-e-rasool,* a term attributed to practices that the Prophet himself followed or approved of and hence should be aspired to be emulated by the followers of Islam. Hence, it was important to her that women should be modestly dressed. In her opinion, purdah did not mean isolating oneself indoors. Presently, circumstances demand that women venture out into the public sphere for one reason or the other. It has become imperative for women to become visible. However, she maintained that public interactions can be conducted with the hijab.

The khawateem has made its presence felt through services in the separated public realm. These women have been at the forefront in the event of a death. Responsible for taking care of funerary rites and rituals on the death of a female member of the basti, they bathe the bodies of the deceased, organise prayer meetings for them, flock to the deceased's house on the 10th, 20th, and 40th day to host visitors who come to pay their respects. The vigour reflected in their involvement on such social and communal occasions is testimony to their longing

to make meaningful contributions in the community. Why then would such a highly motivated bunch of women not be able to hold public offices or assume leadership roles outside the ijtema? The most cited reason was their educational backwardness despite a general consensus that women ought to take up powerful positions. However, educational backwardness is not exclusive to women.

Modern Muslim Girls

There was no preferential treatment in sending sons to schools and keeping the daughters behind. In terms of education, the men were as deprived as the women, and presently women have outdone them in academics. Men usually drop out of school early, barely finishing their education, and get married. This has been an observable trend for generations. With the onus of earning a living falling on the men the division of labour became more rigid and women had to take on domestic responsibilities. The implications of financial responsibilities falling on men have a tremendous impact on their female dependents. As Feroza explained, while she was growing up with her sisters, they could only wear what was bought for them, unlike her daughters who can exercise their own discretion in making fashion choices with their own earnings. This insight is not particular to her, and her explanation shows how gender relations are embedded in home economic arrangements.

The notion that the Quran has apportioned equal opportunities for men and women for accessing *ilm* (knowledge) and economic opportunities as long as the latter conform to the norms of modesty is not foreign. There is a considerable number of young women who are the first generation to have completed their post-graduate studies in the basti. Jaida Khatoon, a 28-year-old English Literature student is one of them. She is now exploring a life that she thinks is different from her mother's. Equipped with her degree and an exceptionally kind heart, she is now preparing to apply for teaching positions in Siliguri. According to her, lack of exposure and the limited information about

the world in the basti made parents and the youth unaware of the opportunities that were available to them, unlike 'women in the cities who have resources as well as exposure to become self-reliant.' With time, the number of women going to universities in cities to obtain higher education, though still rare, is gradually increasing.

Alisha Khannum is currently pursuing her Masters in Sociology from the Rabindra Bharti University and Sadika Firdosh has just completed her training in nursing. Both of them have found tremendous encouragement from their families and, according to them, have always enjoyed the freedom to pursue their dreams. They even invoked the Quran and referred to the chapter, previously discussed by Lamberet, called *An-Nisa* (meaning The Woman) to argue that Islam has accorded equal place to women vis-à-vis men. However, the condition that they must observe the Islamic norm of modesty in terms of wearing 'proper' clothes still applies to them by which they meant 'loose and baggy clothing that did not accentuate their figures'. Their accounts are remarkable in many ways because they not only demonstrate women's aspirations but also the attitudinal shift in the families' outlook on women accessing the public space. The decision-making responsibilities have been passed down to a generation of parents who are more amenable to the idea of education preceding marriage.

Such an inter-generational transition in terms of education not only delivers differential outcomes in terms of employment opportunities and women's ability to access them depending on their qualifications but also brings two other points to light. Firstly, notwithstanding the type of education that they have obtained, religious or secular, these women have been attempting to define their power in different ways. For the first set of women, power is located in their practice of piety through which they express their individuality and also incentivise their knowledge and customs to represent their community to assert their distinctiveness in the cosmopolitan landscape of Darjeeling. Secondly, the liberty exercised by the second set of women who are now exploring horizons and obtaining degrees, is a result of the

negotiations of their predecessors as much as it is the fruits of their determination. Mothers and grandmothers have created conditions at the family level for them to explore opportunities that they were deprived of.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Economic Burden and Women's Agency: Rukkaiya's Story

Religion's role in shaping the idea of a woman's place and conduct in the basti has been significant. A great emphasis is laid on a woman's *izzat* (honour), which is her responsibility to safeguard. Most women irrespective of their age informed me that their understanding of religion has been passive. In other words, elder women of the basti are mostly illiterate or have basic reading skills in Arabic to read the Quran, and younger women who attend schools are attending secular English-medium schools and can only read the Quran. The number of women who can offer *namaz* is limited, as they are preoccupied with domestic chores or other household responsibilities. As such, their understanding of the Islamic way of life comes from religious conversations at home and in community interactions. This is knowledge that has been passed down. There is consensus among men and women that purdah and proper behaviour for men and women have their roots in Islam and are not to be violated.

Farida Begum, a 64-year-old woman explained that while growing up in the basti as an unmarried teenager she and her sisters were only allowed to remain home or run errands for their uncle's shop. Apart from that, they were encouraged to listen to scriptural lessons. At times when they managed to steal some basic lessons at the girls' Maktab, her ill-tempered father fetched them back from the school. Beginning the onset of menstruation, girls are discouraged from playing outdoors especially with boys. The dupatta is supposed to be their constant

friend because *'Woh izzat ko dhakta hai.'*[4] Adolescent girls and older women are not supposed to laugh out loud. Flashing the *batteesee* (referring to a full set of 32 teeth) and *khilkhila ke hasna* (to laugh heartily) are frowned upon. Women are told not to hover around the masjid area, especially during the time of namaz. The demurer they can become, the more desirable. These considerations are prevalent in the basti even today.

Despite these considerations we see that community life in the basti is not very conservative in practice. The discourse of the 'good Muslim woman' does not successfully translate to their everyday lives. Women are ever-present in the public eye—in the lanes, frequenting markets and interacting with men, and sometimes even fighting publicly. This is far from the image of an idealised woman in religion. However, the contrast in their idea of an idealised woman and their lived experience is not a mark of hypocrisy, accusations that are flung by other observant veil-clad Muslim women or even non-Muslim respectable ladies. The general notion that floats around is that these rustic basti women are Muslim in their claims but fall short in their practices. Such a simplistic view is not only reductive but also dismissive of their self-identity, which they locate in their community's religious customs and articulate through their community's rhetoric.

One of the women (referred to as Rukkaiya) revealed how much public space a woman can access and many more things. I asked her about the *rok tok* that both of us are familiar with. She said that the *paabandi* (restrictions) that was earlier imposed on women in the basti was because of the conservatism that prevailed due to illiteracy and lack of education. However, as time progressed, Muslims started gradually becoming flexible in their views about women. I felt that her views were shaped by her own lived experiences. Islam mandates that a man should provide for the family while the woman has to tend to the household. However, Rukkaiya had to overlook this mandate because circumstances compelled her to go out and look for work. Her husband, like most men, worked as a butcher, but alcohol made him a little unreliable. Thus, despite having to finish chores at home and

send her daughters to school in the morning without any additional help, she went out to different households to do domestic chores. She used her agency to defy traditional norms instead of falling into despair to ensure a better future for her daughters. She asked me to ponder over whether she would have been able to provide an education for her children had she not become an additional source of income and left the household solely under the care of their unreliable father. She believes that it is through her toil and endurance that her children could escape the fate that she was subjected to. Her most honest statement was that her youth, desires, and aspirations had to be set aside completely simply to equip her children for a better future.

As a mother of only daughters, her unique perspective on how we distinguish between sons and daughters and their behaviour in public was refreshing. She said that some issues related to freedom allocated to boys and girls in the basti are not merely rooted in religion but are also about parenthood. For instance, she explained with the help of an interesting dichotomy of parents with sons and parents with daughters. Her observation was that parents with sons are readily available to defend and justify their sons' behaviour. Even in the larger community, if it is known that *'falaana ka beta'* (so and so's son) is a victim of substance abuse or is painting the town red with a string of women or making a spectacle of himself in public, an unfair amount of leniency is shown in taking him to task. I could not have agreed more with her as I always felt that there is an unjustifiable discrepancy between men and women in terms of the 'sin' committed and the consequences thrust on them. In simple words, even if men committed the most unacceptable mistakes, they could get away with little consequences whereas even the slightest offence by women while exercising their freedom could be subjected to the harshest character assassination. As a mother of only daughters, her observation offers more than her subjective bias, one that is not hers alone. It is also a summary of how excuses made for women and men are often gendered.

Rukkaiya spoke of the binary between parents with sons and parents with daughters. She elaborated how the former condoned

the *lafanga-giri* (flaneurism) of their sons and would not bother to question them even if they came home at midnight or did not turn up at all. However, they would have a rigid disciplinary attitude when it comes to their daughters-in law who are expected to sit within the four walls. She insisted that the latter should be reasonable with their daughters in terms of the curfew imposed on them. It simply wasn't the case that daughters who entered homes later than 7 o'clock were trouble makers. It becomes imperative for parents to understand and place implicit trust in their daughters, as women also have important work that can cause delays. The only reciprocation expected of them, according to her, is that daughters should remain within their *daayera* (boundaries) and that one's *imaan* (faith) should be guarded. I tried to probe more on the questions of these two terms, but she insisted that I understood them. So, she smoothly steered the conversation to matters of clothing.

What one wears is not a trivial matter in the basti. Having given her daughters the freedom to choose what they want to wear, Rukkaiya is aware of the implications this has on her parenthood. Nevertheless, she asserts that she has a 'free mind' when it comes to clothing. She acknowledges that daughters have fingers pointed at them if they wear jeans, but, in her mind, izzat is not constituted by clothes. Whether a person wears jeans or a skirt or if a person wears the latest hairstyle, it should not offend anybody, as such clothes still cover up enough skin to keep the izzat intact.

Family, Marriage, and Choice: Roshni's Story

Roshni Di is the 20-year-old niece of Eran Phuppu who looked after a momo shop. Having recently re-married into a typical Bihari Muslim family and opting to wear the hijab, she seemed to have undergone a change of heart about her religious views. I could not identify her with the same Roshni Di who was boisterous and unreserved in her interactions with men and women alike. I can recall so vividly a dateless day in my childhood when I was learning from her how

to wrap dumplings in the momo shop. There were some other customers as well. I cannot remember what the discussion was about, but she made a statement that remained with me, as it echoed such a revolutionary thought for me at that time. She said that women should have the agency to marry whoever they choose to, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, and not succumb to pressures by their parents or society, because it is a woman who has to spend the rest of her life in her husband's home. I took off with the topic of *keti ko izzat* (a woman's honour) and was just meaning to complete my sentence when she finished the sentence with *'suiiee ko tuppo ma huncha'* (sits at the tip of a needle) assuming that I was referring to this common proverb.

I asked her about her views on why women have to be more cautious in guarding their izzat than men. She said that there is no restriction on women accessing public spaces. However, they have to be mindful of how they present themselves in public. She was especially keen on emphasising the significance and necessity of the hijab, which she said is extremely beneficial for safeguarding one's self-respect. She chuckled saying that she had learnt these customs in Patna, where her husband originally comes from. She shared with me some curious conventions that she had noticed there. According to her, although Islam does not approve of women grooming themselves for anybody else apart from their husbands, women in Patna did not refrain from applying conspicuous make-up and matching sets of sarees and footwear while attending weddings and other public ceremonies. However, the gloss of the celebration was only displayed within the venue of the ceremony, following which they ensured that they put their hijabs back. I asked her if she could find any difference in the lives of women in her marital home in Patna and the women in the basti. The most appealing to her seems to be in the way they addressed one another. There, she was touched to know that everyone referred to their elders and youngsters with *'aap'*. Admitting that it was different from what she had experienced in the basti, she recalled how she used to be in matters of etiquette. She had never referred to anyone younger as aap.

On probing further, she opened up about her position in her household, which gives an inkling of how a *bahu* is expected to conduct herself. She said that she has no *ijazat* to continue with the work that she did earlier or find new work. It would be a matter of disgrace lest any onlooker should question her mother-in-law, or worse her brother-in-law, about the circumstances that led them to allow their bahu to venture out to earn money. She did not think she was under any restrictions, as she was permitted to go to the market with her sister Zarina. She was only expected not to remove her hijab or engage in futile conversations with a *gair mard* (a non-related man). Explaining what she thinks is a *bazaariya* identity, she revealed the characterisation that conjured up in her mind with an example. She said that 'such' women have earned their reputation by mingling freely with men and visiting them in hotels and drinking and smoking with them. If a young boy or a man indulged in the same activities, they were conveniently exempt from any kind of accountability. Women have to be conscious about the fact that they are the custodians of not only their own but also their families' izzat. For her the dictum that should guide the bastis' daughters' behaviour was thoughts about their parents being on the receiving end of pointing fingers. *Falaana ka beti!* So, and so's daughter! A mantra that has been so instrumental in 'controlling' girls, still reverberates in the basti.

Roshni Di's case suggests that family dynamics play an important role in facilitating, inhibiting, and regulating women's private and public behaviour. Depending on a woman's positionality in the family system, differential treatment can be observed. More often than not, in many cases women confessed that it was their mothers-in-law or sisters-in-law who commanded authoritative restrictions on them. Assenting to their request for anonymity, they are not named. Roshni Di's conformity is specific to the rules of her particular household and her status as the daughter-in-law. She relinquished the relative freedom from purdah that she enjoyed as a formerly-divorced woman in her aunt's house. That she has no ijazat to continue working and she has to behave in an acceptable manner lest she bring dishonour to

the family is again the patriarchal trope of reasoning that conflates a woman's actions as directly related to the honour of her husband and his family. Similar experiences were shared by another woman who said that her view about the oppression that she thought she had grown up with in the basti was dramatically transformed when she left it after her marriage 23 years ago. Despite growing up with elder brothers and a disciplinarian and devout father who imposed restrictions on her behaviour and her choice of clothing, she had enjoyed a healthy social life with her female friends, which she remembered with fondness. In contrast, after marriage, her freedom to step out of the house was severely curtailed by her mother-in-law and other members of her husband's family who practically isolated her from her own maternal family. She related how any action, however insignificant, that aroused their displeasure would be met with harsh declarations of her butcheriya upbringing. Any shortcomings in fulfilling domestic chores would invite comments on her wasted and un-schooled childhood that she had spent mostly outdoors with her friends. Her testimony is indicative of how sites and mechanisms of subordination can take on different characteristics according to where a woman is located. In her case, the impositions that she had felt earlier as a girl seemed to pale in comparison to the oppression she experienced after marriage, and, as she confessed, more than anything it was the power relations within her family that subjected her to such an experience wherein her mother-in-law condemned any resistance from her or her husband.

The idea of a woman's obedience to elders, especially to her husband finds legitimacy in a Quranic verse which reads, 'Men are the upholders and maintainers of women by virtue of that in which God has favoured some of them above others and by virtue of their spending from their wealth.' Lambrabet (2018) argues that the authority in this verse has been ruled by the concept of *qiwama* (maintainer) as a moral authority, which has been rehashed over time and presented as the confirmation of domination of men over women. Conversely, this divinely-endowed authority for men framed the binary of absolute obedience of women to this authority. It is another matter of discussion

whether or not the Quran truly sanctions discriminatory behaviour, as this will require sophisticated hermeneutical frameworks. What is important here is to note how patriarchal perceptions and practices are being used for justifying social relations in a religious vocabulary. Such an apparatus can have profound implications for women's lives whose religious convictions form a significant part of their validation and identity. In such a context, obedience becomes not only a virtue but also an avenue of inclusion.

WOMEN AND RELIGION

The Dawaat-e-Islamia is an organisation of the Sunni sect that first arrived in Darjeeling Hills around 15 years ago. It was a group of a few men who donned white salwar kameez, almost like the habit of a Christian monk but not quite. One distinctive article of clothing that initially turned heads and aroused curiosity among the Muslims and non-Muslims alike was the green cloth wrapped around their heads, fashioned almost like a turban but not quite. The appointed head of the organisation was referred to as *madina*. Eran Phuppu was reverent in acknowledging the initiatives taken by the Dawaat-e-Islamia. According to her, it played a crucial role in restoring the glory of the old days where religion was central to the basti*waalas*.

The dominant school of thought that the people of the basti adhere to is of the Barelwi order, which distinguishes them from the Deobandi order. The latter emphasises the sacrosanct nature of the *Sharia* and calls for a return to its directives. The former emerged as a counter to the latter's reformist movement in 18th-century North India, which allowed heterodox practices. These practices were prevalent even before their arrival and included nailing the corners of the house to ward off evil *jinns*, kissing the thumbs on the mention of the Prophet, wearing charmed amulets, *pir* worship, reading the *Fatiha*, and celebrating the Prophet's birthday. The inclusive promise

of these practices, which accepted custom-laden traditions, made them appealing to the subaltern in the 18th century (Metcalf 1996).

The history of Islam has shown that the saints played a crucial role in its propagation. This is not evident in Darjeeling though the saints' influence pervades the lives of the locals of Butcher Basti. A local *mazaar* (grave turned shrine) exists in Darjeeling. Rajib Chatterjee writes that after 1950, a local man named Mohammed Kashim looked after the graveyard near the slaughter house and maintained it in a voluntary capacity. One person who was buried in a particular part of the grave appeared in Mohammed's dream, after which he started offering prayers and flowers, which then turned it into a local shrine. Chatterjee identifies Mohammed Kashim as a Nepali Muslim. However, when I probed further after coming across his name, I learnt that Mohammed Kashim was my grandfather, and the person's grave that he was attending to was actually a local Nepali Hindu who had converted to Islam (Chatterjee 2012). However, the *mazaar* has no bearing on the lives of women as they are not permitted in the graveyard. Sufism is entrenched in the basti people's larger belief system, which is evident in their affiliative practices of pir worship. The absence of mazaars of historical saints rules out the argument that Islam spread in Darjeeling through propagation. It also explains the popularity of the Khwaja Garib Nawaz, the Chistiya Sufi saint in Ajmer. People here are the only Muslim community to celebrate his *urs*, a six-day affair marking the death anniversary of the saint with great vigour. Such occasions including the Prophet's birthday are important as community affairs wherein there is equal visibility and participation of women who organise all the activities. These activities include raising funds for the occasion, setting up a common kitchen for the day, and distributing fatiha delicacies among which the *khichda* is specially made for this occasion.

Similarly, even in the predominant Sunni landscape of Darjeeling, Muharram is observed with a carnivalesque fervour. Muharram is not just confined to the basti as the *tazia*[5] procession is displayed in the heart of the main bazaar facing the beef complex, and people of

all faiths come to pay their respects on the last two days of the ten-day affair when the display takes place. Consequently, Muharram observation has a significant role in asserting the Muslim identity in Darjeeling. The Muharram committee in Butcher Basti mainly consists of men who are involved in designing the tazia and who take part in the *julus* (procession) by beating a drum and *lathi*, sparring which they perform throughout the ten days in the basti and the town. Women make special *malida* cakes, a sweet dish, and see the performances as onlookers. On the tenth day or *Dasmi* (Ashura) when the tazia is terminated on the Kak Jhora bridge, adolescent girls take the lead and carry the tazia chanting, *'Karbala door hai, jaana zaroor hai' (*Karbala is far away, we must go on our way). These practices are viewed with disapproval by the larger Muslim community, which disassociates itself from the Muharram spectacle (Pinault 2001). Women's participation in Muharram is looked upon as unbecoming of proper conduct apart from being un-Islamic and is criticised as *tamasha* or even parodied. On the other hand, it is an enduring example of how mainstream Muslim cultures are democratised by local people who are located in far-flung places by their turning larger symbols of faith into their own.

The Dawaat-e-Islamia is affiliated to the Barelwi school of thought, which is why it was accommodated in the basti with relative ease. I can testify to their growing influence. When it was four or five members strong, it operated from a small room teaching me and other children how to read the Quran. Within half a decade, they grew in numbers and also managed to take young men from the basti into their fold, who then started wrapping their heads with the green turban and swiping *soorma* in their eyes. By the authority they commanded and for families who revered them, a novel trend in terms of women's visibility began to emerge. The emphasis on women observing purdah in the basti had already been established but the pre-existing notion had been that the purdah can be limited to the hijab. Some women started adopting the *burqa* and began recommending its virtues. This was a historic shift in the Barelwi community. Gradually, the Dawaat-e-Islamia also recommended changes in terms of the visibility of women

in the Muharram processions, and on other occasions asking for proper segregation of men and women. Before its arrival, the women of the basti had a considerable presence in the Gorkhaland movement that was revived under Bimal Gurung in 2007, as young women came forward to represent the Muslim community. Now, the local media flocks to the Dawaat-e-Islamia and its leader when diversity is to be staged. They act as the spokesperson for the basti, and the men who are seeking political opportunities are complicit in this staging wherein put on a green cloth and white kurta pyjamas essentialising the basti's dynamism into a mascot.

The Dawaat-e-Islamia is not averse to the demonstrable aspects of displayed public practices. In fact, its members encourage *tilawat* (recitation that is done aloud), broadcasts of *naats* (songs in praises of the Prophet), and welcome religious gatherings as an essential medium for fostering Islamic ethos, but these should only include men. The reinforcement of Barelwi teachings under its leadership has become animated with the activities of the Dawaat-e-Islamia, which has proven counter-productive however noble the intentions. The basti community was already stigmatised by subscribers of other schools of thought in the Kashmiri and Bihari Muslim circles and by Tibetan Muslim communities who are not affiliated to any particular school but view Barelwi practices as un-Islamic. The hybridised lineage as thembars, custom-laden practices, and their socioeconomic status have intersected to situate this community in a precarious position. Referring to an incident when they visited Ramganj in a group to attend a wedding when the locals there questioned the Muslimness of the Nepali looking, Eran Phuppu remarked, *'Na Nepali log accept karta hai, inharu kattu ho bhancha, aur musalman log bolta hai in log Nepali Musalman hai*[6] (They are neither fully integrated into the Nepali community nor recognised as 'good Muslims' by other Muslim communities).

THE WAY FORWARD: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND WOMEN CHANGE MAKERS

Sabina Begum, better known as Nannu Mami lives near the girls' Maktab. For me, she was that outspoken woman who was considered *baathhi* (brazen) by all. With a sharp tongue, she was known for interfering in all matters. When I visited her, she was lying down on her diwan with her *paan*-case (betel leaf case) within her reach. She sat upright and welcomed me to sit beside her. She had been in the forefront of important matters related to the community's welfare. Due to her experience and activism, she plunged straight into Anjuman issues. There is no woman office holder in the Anjuman, she said. For her, there was a desperate need for this to change. Her rationale was that since women have been living through thick and thin with their male counterparts, sharing their burdens without complaints, it was only fair that their opinions and contributions be sought even in official matters. *'Jab hum log kandha mein kandha milakar, gents ka, chalte hai toh ladies bhi hona chaiye'* (Women should be present there when we have always remained shoulder-to-shoulder with men), she argued. She was not suggesting that she herself should be given powers, but unlike her, her children were educated and qualified to be considered for leadership positions.

She pointed out that there are politicians who visit the basti during elections haranguing the residents with their developmental and utopian promises. Soon after their ulterior motives have been satisfied, they do not care. *'Vote ka baad koi poochne bhi nahi aata hai'* (Nobody arrives after elections to ask after us). Revealing that there have been four vacancies in the girls' Maktab school for many years, she raised the question as to why they have not been filled by girls from the basti. When as a parent she understood how important it was for girls to obtain a B.Ed. and an M.Ed, she strived hard to equip her daughters with employability. Even then, no local politician has taken account of their hard work. *'Aap hi log bolte hai, bada bada neta log ki B.Ed karna*

zaruri hai lekin kyun nahi aata hai vacancies. Kya hum log minority hai isiliye? Kya hai aapka beti logka haal yeh toh puchna parega na?' (All you big leaders preach us the virtues of big degrees but never release any vacancies. Is it because we are a minority? Shouldn't they be enquiring after our daughters?).

Her view on purdah was that traditions of the past have no place in today's world. These were revolutionary times. How long should women remain in their homes? It has become inevitable for women to step out of their homes to shape their own lives. She illustrated her point with an example. If a situation presented itself and her husband got involved in a brawl and was in a disadvantageous position where he could be overtaken physically by another man, she asked if it would be wiser for her to remain within the walls of her house and sob, contemplating purdah compliance or go out to defend his honour? For her, there was no virtue in such pacifism.

According to her, the current state of the basti is truly dismal. Every family is living difficult lives and, though they may not express their struggles openly, the reality of the socioeconomic crisis is all-pervading. Her claims were legitimate, she told me, and I can say that her testimony came across as sincere. When I raised the topic of the restrictions placed on the daughters of the basti, she had an interesting reply, 'Our daughters are not cattle.' She said that parents need to understand that their daughters have their own sense of judgement and are wise enough to discern what is right and what is wrong. They already know what Allah would find virtuous or sinful. Parents should fulfil their duty to educate their children about what is wrong and right, following which they must allow their children to decide how to live their lives on their own terms. There is no need to fasten our daughters to the threshold. It has been 40 years since Nannu Mami's marriage in the basti and she has grown old along with the place. However, she is not happy with the pace of progress for women here.

The two-fold attack on male domination and the local government's spectacular failure in accounting for the lack of progress

of the Muslim community in the basti, particularly for women, demonstrates the intersection of economic structures and the status quo in terms of political power. Esther Duflo's (2012) thesis that economic development is a major determinant in improving women's lives and empowering them resonates in the case of the basti and should inform policymaking at the local level. She argues that women's inaccessibility in education, politics, and the labour market may even relegate them into isolation where pre-existing gender biases can become sharpened. As such, for women in the basti who may not have Nannu Mami's courage to go for public activism and the exposure and insight she has gained from it, their ambitions have been set at a very low standard. Using Duflo's corollary, we can risk a conclusion that strict compliance with the purdah will continue to keep women away from education and exposure, physical and otherwise, due to domestic relegation where the primacy of religion and the solace derived from it will perpetuate gender norms within family systems, which will allow women minimal mobility.

Nasreen Khatoon's opinion about gender representation on the Anjuman's board was something I had not expected. 'We want to help and cooperate with men to make this a better place. We know what are the real problems and how we should tackle them,' she said. Referring to a legal case between the Wahabi and the Sunni groups, who are battling for the ownership of the masjid, she explained how deeply they felt the need to stand by the Sunni men. They had been battling to prevent the encroachment of the masjid by the Wahabis, and women, including herself, were not hesitant to venture out and fight for Sunni pride. The group of men who occupy powerful positions in the Anjuman dominate the women and pay them no heed. The organisation has failed to fulfil its original role of looking after the afflicted in society, mainly widows and orphans. Considering these things, it has become important for women to become outspoken, to be involved actively in social matters, and to be able to assertively place these concerns in the Anjuman, a male space. She maintained

that of utmost urgency was not who is a bazaariya woman and who is a *nek* woman. It was for us to come together to achieve the collective objective to preserve our identity as the Muslim community. She was very optimistic that such a day was not far.

An unprecedented attempt is underway, spearheaded by Feroza aunty. Along with a few other women, she has been petitioning in the Anjuman to form a recognised committee for women run by the women. Her education has equipped her to explore networks that can enable and push the Anjuman's leaders to allow the realisation of such a community. She has also led a community ration drive in the basti where she gathered young men to organise the event and help in raising funds. She also contributed from her own purse to provide essential supplies during the pandemic-imposed lockdown, which had brought hardships to many households in meeting even their most basic needs. She said, 'When women have problems, where do they go? These men in power do not understand our problems.' She is gathering force and also approaching the Wakf Board to understand the bureaucratic underpinnings of legitimately anchoring themselves in the Anjuman. She has envisioned a committee that does not admit women based on their education. So, we see women who are striving to contribute in development efforts for the basti set an example for future generations despite opposition. The accounts of these women are germane in understanding how lived experiences can shape motherhood, which can sometimes radically transform how they imagine their daughters' lives. This attitudinal shift has opened a space for younger generations to be able to create their own meanings about womanhood, which may vary from their predecessors' experiences. A larger scenario that emerges is how these women are not only contending with the issues limited to their own families or fighting inequalities they experience within their own Muslim community but also outside their community in the larger politics of Darjeeling where they seek representation.

CONCLUSION

Islamicate societies on the fringes display a syncretism that testifies the pluralism of the faith. The lives of the women in the basti demonstrate that a mainstream understanding of a Muslim woman as an oppressed victim is far from true. Without dismissing the role of religion in limiting women's public visibility, we can conclude that even within patriarchal and oppressive structures, societies respond in multiple ways to exercise their freedom. The concept of purdah is prevalent in the basti and finds legitimacy and significance in the religious scriptures, but they also quote scriptures to find emancipatory and empowering meanings in them. The emphasis on daayera was abundant and almost everybody I spoke to, whether men or women, maintained that women can exercise their freedom on the condition that they honour their families. According to this, women should avoid blatantly flouting rules that are un-Islamic, which include consuming alcohol, sexual relations with men other than their husbands, and wearing revealing clothes. The underlying anxiety related to a woman's sexuality is not particular to Islam, and exploring heterodox communities like the butcheriya Muslims of Darjeeling allows us to dispel stereotypes that attempt to essentialise large communities. Though certain public behaviour is met with disapproval, women have come to enjoy considerable autonomy in exercising their freedom of choice in matters related to marriage and divorce, education, and choice of clothes. Resistance to customs that curtail their freedom has not resulted in ostracisation even if they are criticised for their transgressions being religious violations. Inter-generational conflicts about the notions of womanhood are evident in the differential lifestyles that women in the basti have adopted, which show how divergent subjectivities can be embodied within the same apparatus of belief systems and ideologies.

Growing up, I despised the fact that I was part of such a nosy community of people who begrudged us our 'liberty'. I firmly believed

and knew that I would never change my mind about them. They had been slandering me and relished in giving me a bad name. They had no other job than interfering in the lives of young girls, or so I thought. Such a conclusion invoked deep sympathy in me for Manish Di, a Nepali girl who I befriended as a young girl. Her vivacious nature always appealed to me. She must have been aware of the kind of reputation she had because of it, but her response was commendable. She would say that she would never let the noise around her make her submissive or resign her sense of freedom. She was the one who introduced me to English songs. I also helped her procure some interesting articles of consumption, which we would then take to public lavatories to secretly puff. The corner-most section of the lavatory served as a good spot to puff away in case some nervy woman could see us and make a big fuss about it. The boys in the neighbourhood pursued her and she had her ways of shooing them or wooing them. She could dance, sing, and kept a neat house. When I was turning into a rotten apple, some people even conjectured that it was the consequence of Muslim girls getting influenced by *kaafirs* (non-Muslims). However well-versed in the ritualistic aspects of Islam and a firm believer myself, I could not bring myself to understand why women in our community had so many restrictions. Why so much *rok tok?*

My engagement with the men and women of the basti has personally been compelling. In terms of research, in the interviews with 30 women and 10 men, my own biases have been re-informed and this has allowed me to think about gender in unique ways. Only one woman's name has been changed according to her preference. My former prejudices have embarrassed me and my misguided ideas about feminism have been sobered. Lack of proper historical resources and some limitations imposed by the pandemic limited my research, but the scope of investigating their lives remains ample through frameworks other than historical. For instance, information on how the Partition of 1947 affected the Muslim demographics of Darjeeling and if it had any impact on their lives remains to be explored, if these changes occurred at all. Archival mining may help in uncovering these

aspects. We know that Darjeeling was caught in the scramble of the Partition and the Muslim League as a potential contender to acquire it had even raised the Pakistani flag over the municipality building on 14–18 August 1947 (Middleton & Schneiderman 2018), Apart from this detail, there is a major gap in the history of the Partition and its effect in Darjeeling, which may open up space to do more informed research on the Muslim population of the Hills.

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NOTES

1. Pertaining to Butcher Basti.
2. Arabic alphabet.
3. Faithful.
4. Metaphorically used to mean that it covers one's breasts.
5. Replicas of structures symbolising the graves of Hasan and Husain, the Prophet's grandsons who were martyred in the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD.
6. She is alternating between Nepali and butcheriya saying, 'Neither Nepalese people accept us, they call us *kattus* (a derogatory term for a Muslim), nor do other Muslims accept us saying that we are Nepalis.'

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Kismat Khatoon, in discussion with the author, Dr Zakir Hussain Basti, Darjeeling, 10 November 2020.

Nasreen Khatoon, in discussion with the author, Dr Zakir Hussain Basti, Darjeeling, 3 September 2020.

Roshni, in discussion with the author, Dr Zakir Hussain Basti, Darjeeling, 17 October 2020.

Rukkaiya, in discussion with the author, Dr Zakir Hussain Basti, Darjeeling, 19 October 2020.

Sabina Begum, in discussion with the author, Dr Zakir Hussain Basti, Darjeeling, 3 September 2020.

Sadika Firdosh, in discussion with the author (telephonic), 13 February 2021.