

Children of troubled times: Understanding the distance and time of Muslim Identity

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Abstract

This paper analyses the influence of violence on children by measure of distance. In a world of social media and exclusive headlines, any incident that is communicated to people holds a sense of presence at any location. In this context an act of violence is seen to generate different reactions from the people who were not directly involved with the incident. The reactions are especially interesting when the act of violence is seen as against one community. The community however does not always means one thing or one group of people. It essentially means different people who are clubbed under one group for convenience. This paper notes that there are various means through which a person, in this case child, understands the idea of violence on their community. If a child has just heard about an act of violence or seen it on television, his or her position in the society influences their reaction to it that is communicated as 'against' one community.

KEYWORDS : Children, Experience, Violence, Diversity, Muslim

Introduction

'...true reality does not exist 'out there'...it is actively created as we act in and toward the world' (Ritzer, 2011: 338)

The aforementioned quote elucidates the necessity of understanding reality as a process rather than a completed work. In the context of violence it is essential to understand that its existence is in many folds. A physical act of violence is one part of the reality; that is produced and reproduced through various sources in the conscious of the people. This constant procedure of forging of reality feeds in the way an act of violence is understood by general public or the way they form their reactions. This paper discusses the way identity plays a role to understand the narrative of violence in a context of diverse Muslim community in India. By discussing an incident of violence with Muslim children in Delhi, this paper analyse their reactions to understand the way they construct a reality of an incident.

In time when children are exposed to various kinds of violence every day, there is limited understanding of the ways they perceive these experiences (Barber; 2008:3). The complex phenomenon that political violence is, the way children make meaning of it will be discussed in this paper. The questions of belonging to the community under attack or the fact of sharing an address with the victims of violence must have some impact on the way an incident is understood by children. This paper constantly dwells on what is the nature of belonging in case of a violent act on a community. The way every day interaction is shaped around an incident of violence, this paper questions that if it impacts

the way children interact with each other and their environment. The hypothesis here is that there are forms of identity, for instance of religion and language, that may contribute to an idea of belonging and faith amongst citizens in a place.

Bonds between citizens in the form of faith and security in an area is a dynamic process like making of any other social reality. The narrative around violence that is presented on the television or as an account heard from others may be understood by people on their own terms. This paper will argue that the understanding a situation is also defined by the socio-political location of a person in a context. In the first part of this paper will elaborate and reflect on the way children's reactions to violence have been understood by other researchers. The next part will dwell on the material and method of the study undertaken which also will point towards the incident in question. In the next section there will be a discussion on the collected data. This section will include anecdotes from personal interviews conducted with children. The paper will conclude by putting a perspective on the way children perceive violence and their socio-political identity along with the idea of belonging to a community.

A School and Muslim Social Identity- A Conceptual Framework

In medical perspective children who have witnessed violence in any way are characterised as silent (Bunston et.al., 2016; Groves et al 1993). In a paediatric context the observer of violence are traumatised and in need to help. In a social context however these children must be seen as an active individual who make sense of a political incident as a whole rooted in the context of their lives. In case of intimate partner violence which children witness it has been argued that the experience influences their growth and cognitive development (Izaguirre & Cater, 2018 and 2015; Callaghan, 2018; Eriksson, 2017). There are various kinds of mental and psychological irregularities that are associated with the traumatic experiences that children observe in the families or neighbourhood. Though this line of argument holds substantial merit, it still is unable to explain the meaning making that children does in these instances.

The simplistic relationship drawn between violence and children does not hold much merit when the idea of socio-political perspective is brought into the analysis. By bringing in the debates of proximity and location into the experiences of violence Etherington and Baker (2016) produce an inter-sectional approach to understand children's active role in meaning making of political violence. In incidents like school-shooting and intimate partner violence the children are at the front seat to witness the act of violence and its consequences. There is a systematic process of taking decisions to get involved to become oblivious to the situation taken by the child. These choices are also influence by the way the environment is shaping around the incident. For instance the way the victim responds to them, or the school discussion also become part of children's understanding of the incident (Zakai, 2019; Hendricks et.al.2019; Eriksson, 2017; Åkerlund & Sandberg, 2017).

What happens when we involve school in this idea of social capital and trust? The everyday acts in a school must be studied to understand their impact on the feeling of trust within students in a community and the institution itself. There are everyday processes that cause feelings of trust or the opposite in students which transforms these interactions with other people at home and neighbourhood. School also impacts the way students view their community and the area that they stay in. In the context of Muslim students in India it is very relevant to look at the study conducted by Veronique Benei on the schools of Kohlapur, Maharashtra in this regard.

Benei (2009), in her ethnography of schools in Kohlapur, Maharashtra, argues that schools are involved in banal nationalism that informs students about their identity as Indian nationals. However, the school environment in this course became so estranging for Muslim children that they feel alienated. This happens because the curriculum of schools does not accommodate minority students. Hence, many parents are forced to withdraw their children from mainstream schools and send them to Madarasas, or schools located in a Muslim ghetto. They do this to affirm their religious identity of being Muslims. Such an affirmation is not accepted in mainstream schools. Through daily activities and the school curriculum, these students felt themselves as the 'other'.

Benei's ethnography of the schools in Maharashtra informs about the 'sensorium' that is created within the schools and outside it by describing *Shivaji*¹ in the textbooks and showing him on the streets in form of statues and photographs. Other forms of influencing also involve the use of Maratha musical or the military instruments such as drums and others, all of which contribute to reproduce a sense of strong Maratha identity. She points out that this influences the Muslim students because by celebrating *Shivaji* as a hero, the Muslims, he fought against, are shown as the villains in the history of Maharashtra. She argues that the school processes were such that Muslim students were becoming apprehensive of their religious identity. The uncomfortable encounters with the anti-Muslim sentiments forced some of the Muslim students to withdraw from schools.

She then presents her observation of a government school that has a dominant representation of Muslim students. This school is located in *Sachar Bazaar* in Kolhapur that accommodates the emotional and social needs of the Muslim students in the state. The first comment that she makes on visiting the school is about the '...the relationship between the higher state authority (corporation officials) descending upon subaltern state servants (the teachers)' (2009: 178). Muslims are the minority community of the region. They have their own ways to negotiate with the larger narrative and find a respectable place for themselves. This particular school is one of the few Urdu speaking schools of the district. Muslims are constructed as the 'other' in the overall educational narrative of Maharashtra.

Benei specifically mentions the ways that Muslims have their own versions of the disregarding textbooks. Though the textbooks are same as for the other schools, the teachers and students build their own narrative around them to create a space for

¹ *Shivaji* was an Indian Rajput king who is closely associated with pride of Hindu identity in Maharashtra, India.

themselves. For instance, she describes a school visit to *Bijapur* fort which is looked upon by the Muslims as their legacy. She points out that one of the main reasons for the preference of this particular school by Muslims to send their children is language. Urdu is considered to be one major part of the identity amongst Muslims; especially the girls are preferred to be educated in Urdu. Also, the economic constraints serve as a barrier to move far off from the location they are living in and get educated in Marathi Schools. This as well might lead to the ‘...polarisation of the society’ (2009: 208) and ‘...Muslims becoming second class citizen of the country’ (2009: 209). It is important to know that these observations were made at the time around the 1971 India-Pakistan War, known as ‘Operation Vijay’. These observations are placed at a time of conflict where Muslims are suspiciously judged regarding their allegiance to the nation of India. It is important to understand the impact of conflict on education. This paper observes that the reaction of school on any incidence of violence is pertinent for the faith that students observe in the system and the surroundings. The interaction in school becomes a significant constituent of trust that students reflect in their behaviours.

Methods and Materials

This study was conducted in Delhi during 2011-2014. It was after the Batla House encounter,² or Operation Batla House (Singh, 2017). During this time there was frenzy against this incident in Delhi, particularly in Jamia Nagar. Civil society, teachers and students of Jamia Millia Islamia and many others voiced their dissatisfaction about the action of the police in this incident. It was opined that this was an act of profiling and acting on the stereotypes (Singh, 2013). Larger social reaction blamed the police, eventually blaming them for brutality against Muslim youth in general. They were blamed for picking up Muslim men from the religiously concentrated spaces of Delhi and other parts of the country and taking them into their custody. This practice becomes more aggravated around any occasion of national importance like Republic Day and others.

A constant interest of state in the everyday lives of Muslims, in India, has been seen as a political concern by scholars (Ahmad 2019, Shaban 2018, Kumar 2010). Apart from violence on the street, a narrative of fear has been observed to have formed in the minds of Muslims in India (NMCME, 2013). The focus when shifts to children with regard to violence, researchers in context other than India, have observed that there are three levels at which the conflict affects the children. The first is the direct experience of war or violence against themselves, or the adults who care for them. The second is the damage done to the society round them, through which their ability to learn and develop is

² In the aftermath of serial blasts in Delhi, India on 13th September 2008, Delhi Police launched ‘Operation Batla House’ on 19th September 2008 against the Indian Mujahideen terrorists who were living in Batla house locality of Jamia Nagar, Delhi. The encounter was taken as an act of violence against the Muslim community. This led to a series of protests by the political parties, activists, residents of Jamia Nagar and Students and teachers of Jamia Millia Islamia against the Delhi Police. Many versions of the encounter were presented, several of these pointing at the actions of police guided by the stereotypical image of ‘Muslim terrorists’. Subsequently, after an enquiry and on the High Court’s directive, given on 21 May 2009, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in its 22 July report, absolved the Delhi Police of any violations of rights of the people encountered or arrested during Operation Batla House. Nonetheless, speculations regarding this judgement and the role of Delhi Police still continue in academic circles in India.

hampered because of the loss of security and sense of their place in the world. Finally, there is the disruption of educational opportunities, in that conflict destroys schools and school systems, as well as the people' Molteno, et.al. (eds.) 1999)³. Rai (2018) also notes that the development of children is effected by violence.

Farzana (2017) also has noted in her observation on Rohingya Muslim children in camp site of Bangladesh that the thought process of the children, who have seen violence, is dominated by feeling of vulnerability. This paper however moves with the argument a bit further. I question children who have not directly seen or observed the scene of violence. All of the respondents have just heard about the incident by their parents or as a new report. By the fact of their identity being same as of the victim of violence, I tried to find out if they also have been influenced by that one act. The interviews were held at the homes of the respondents with the consent of their parents, also only after understanding that the children already have heard about the Batla House encounter. This paper argues that the affect of violence amongst children of a same community, Muslims in this case, depends on other factors that their religious identities.

This research comprises data from seven informal interviews conducted with teenagers in the age group of fourteen to sixteen. Sample of the study was chosen on the basis of convenience. The location of the study was scattered around Delhi due to purposive sampling of the respondents. In the opening session of the interview I introduced my research question to the family of the child. They were asked about their knowledge about the Batla House incident also if they have discussed it with their child with whom I will be conducting the interview. While the interview was largely unstructured, it started with the question about the knowledge of the child of the incident. It was then followed up by a discussion on if they think that the incident influences them in any way and the reasons for it, this includes their experience at home, neighbourhood and respective schools. All the interviews were conducted in Hindustani language which was then translated to English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the research it was found that the discussion around the Batla House incident often ignited fear in the heart and minds of young adults staying in Jamia Nagar where the incident took place. This fear however was stretched thinned while moving away

³ As quoted in Davies, Lynn. 2004. *Education and Conflict: Complexity and Chaos*. Routledge Falmer: USA. For a detailed discussion on the effect of conflict on school education, please refer to Justino Patricia, Brück Tilman, Verwimp Philip, Brück Tilman and Philip Verwimp. (Eds.). 2013. *A Micro-Level Perspective on the Dynamics of Conflict, Violence, and Development*. Oxford University Press: UK. For specific understanding of religious conflicts please refer to Gort, Jerald D; Jansen, Henry; and Hendrick M. Vroom. (Eds.). 2002. *Religion, conflict and Reconciliation*. World Alliance of reformed Churches theological Subcommittee of the European Area Committee: USA.

from the place of action. At other Muslim dominated areas of Delhi⁴, the fear or reaction to the incident had different dimensions. Shazia⁵, a sixteen-year-old student, in the premises of her home, 'it is likewise at our place too, everybody is scared'. She stays in Daryaganj. She informed that there is a sense of similarity or belonging to the victims, 'people like them (the victims) are all around me'. Her parents often stop her brother to go out at night and far away. They do not want the boys to fall in bad company that can lead to same fate as the boys in Batla House. The incident, its influence on the people and whole idea of troubled Muslim youth are discussed in the house every day. Every discussion culminates into a fear of being a Muslim in Delhi. She also said that her fear, originated from the fact the incident of violence happened in a middle class Muslim locality as hers, the similarity of the location was striking that causes fear.

Shazia's account talks about association and belonging in more than the terms of religious identity. It was also about the class and locality that the incident happened. The boys in the incident looked like youth that Shazia sees every day. Her parents are also worried because her brother has beard. In her parents eyes this is a very controversial bodily feature that puts in the way of danger. Siting all these reasons her parents do not allow the boy to go out at night. This is similar to the step taken by the administration of university hostel of Jamia Millia Islamia and in private hostels in Jamia Nagar. The boys were asked to not go out of the hostels at night as a provision of safety. Shazia's narrative shows that the similarity in identities - in more than one ways - is an essential component of fear. While in this case thinking and gathering knowledge actively are some covert elements of fear, in the other case -as given in the interview a young boy in the next paragraph - the experience is of direct attack on identity.

Asif, an eleven-year-old informed that, after the incident his teacher asked him about 'jihad' twice in the classroom. He ignored the first time but told his parents after the second incident. His parents consulted the school authority to complain about the issue, after which teacher stopped the questions. The same however did not happen with the students; they keep on asking questions regarding Asif's faith in relation to terrorism. He insisted his parents for permission to leave the school. The boy was in mild depression for weeks before the parents decided to take him out of the school. The reason he cite were the continuous questioning about the encounter, about his home in Jamia Nagar, and Muslim faith which made Asif uncomfortable. His experience with the perception of people regarding the encounter was direct and disturbing. Asif noted that he noted that people tend to make generalisations based on different identities. In this case it was his faith and address (of Jamia Nagar) which made his experience in school troublesome.

The incident brought forth the fact that most of the understanding about Muslim community is composed by the association. There is automatic connections that form in

⁴ Within Delhi there are some areas that are known as the Muslim dominated; it is believed that Muslims move to places like Jamia Nagar, or Chandni Chowk, or Daryaganj or Seelampur of Delhi in search of security against the communal forces and getting settled in a Muslim *Mahaul* to avoid awkward reactions. It is also argued that Muslims do not get property or residences for rent easily in the Hindu dominated neighbourhood which forced them to move to these places that, in turn, become Muslim dominated.

⁵ The real names of the respondents have not been used in the paper.

the minds of people as happened with the classmates and teachers of Asif. They assumed that being a Muslim is same for everyone, more so if the person lives in the same area where the encounter happened. This mind-set was the beginning of random attacks and questions. In the case of Asif however this all translated as attack on his being that caused his depression. Overtly identifying him with the community by disregarding other ways in which he identifies himself was –for him – denial of his personality. Except for the intervention of the authority on the complaint of parents the teachers and students did not realise the effect of their action on Asif. For them the incident and Asif's faith became an automatic connection. It could be seen as a problem of representation of over identification with only one form of identity. Similar trope was also observed in the conversation given in the next paragraph.

Numaid, a fifteen-year-old resident of Jamia Nagar and student of Jamia School, along with his fourteen-year-old sister Ruhi who attends a government school in the vicinity, told that the Batla House incident is seen as an attack over the Muslims. These are the exact words that he heard his parents speak many times to them. Other elders in the house also keep discussing about how the incident is a case of religious profiling. Numaid understands that by this discussion the elders in the house are trying to inform them that they (the children) must be very careful when outside of home. This is also clear by the fact that a van is hired to drop them to home on time. The restrictions on time stems from the fear that the incident happened near their house. The close vicinity and over enthusiastic discussions in the home regarding it has made the children more cautious. They however have not faced any unwanted questions from school and peers. This according to Numaid might be because everyone know about the incident at school, it is also located in the same vicinity.

Numaid's exposure on the issue is quite contrary to the experience of Muneer who was always picked by a private vehicle from his school, then goes for swimming in the same and attend his tuitions afterwards always escorted by the driver of his car. Muneer has not heard his parents having a discussion on the issue. He does not believe that the issue concerns him. Muneer- a boy of fourteen-years however notes that he does not know much about the incident. He stays in Civil Lines with his parents in an upper-middle class colony. It is different type of residential area that we have discussed so far in the paper. It is also important to note that Numaid's family is amongst the only two Muslim families living in this block of Civil Lines colony. His mother had told him about the incident but after that he has no interaction with it in anyways. Nor in his school was the incident discussed, neither has he followed it on news, as also the case with his parents.

Numaid points out that the reason that the incident is not important to him is because he stays very far away from the place where it took place. In addition he noted that nobody around him discuss the issue which has helped him to not think about such things. Civil Lines, the place where Muneer lives is not only physically far away from Batla House but also is quite different in the structure. It comprise of bungalows that is stark contrast from Jamia Nagar or Daryaganj. Muneer also belongs to a different social class than other respondents.

In case of almost all the teenagers discussed in the paper a trope of belonging and similarity with the place and the victims of the incidents was observed. There also was a relation with the places where the incident was discussed more strictly and in certain kind of language like in the schools. Within the vicinity of Jamia Nagar, the topic of the encounter was raised now and then as a matter of concern, which occurred formally sometimes, and many times in an informal conversation by the school. It is also the area where the incident happened and the community was very active to raise their voice. On the other hand, in Muneer's school, he told, he has not heard people talking about any of these things. The effect of the different conditions of living and the locality of school is striking in the diverse experiences of these children.

Anam is a sixteen-year-old girl. She is the daughter of a university professor of Jamia Millia Islamia and lives in Noida. Her reaction to the question was more of surprise than anything else. Her mother who sat during the whole time in the interview keep on pointing that their family do not live in a Muslim dominated area hence they are not scared of being targeted. While discussing her school experience Anam told that she is a student of a school in south Delhi. Her school is one of the best educational institutions in Delhi. She fiercely asserted that her school never religiously profiled or targeted her because of her religion. Thus, the parents are free from any concern about the education and school environment. Anam however noted that once in the games period, somebody came up to her to ask if she was a Muslim and if she knew why people from 'her community' are killing others. The student that asked the question was two years senior to her so she didn't wanted to complain against her. Nonetheless, it came as a shock to the young girl (Anam) who was quite oblivious of the religious stereotypes that transcends even the class relations. She said that she was shocked, but did not know what to do. She decided to keep quiet.

The only incident that caused worry to Anam was not discussed further by anybody in any of circle. Her mother also claimed that they did not want to foreground this line of questioning to the school authority. There was a consensus to ignore the issue and treat it as an exceptional situation. They were able to do that because the incident or anything similar did not recur. This avoidance she said was possible because of their home being in Noida and the location of Anam's school. The neighbours nearby do not discuss the issue of identity and violence. They believe that staying away from any Muslim dominated space is good during times of trouble. They define trouble as anything that will cause harm to them due to their religious identity.

Seher is a fifteen year old girl who lives in Kamla Nagar area of Delhi. She goes to a nearby school, it is a Christian Missionary school where both of her siblings also receive their education. She describes her experience of the incident as insignificant. The only time she heard about it was when her parents start discussing about shifting their home to Abul-Fazal Enclave near Jamia Nagar. It is a Muslim dominated urban area, where her parents think they will be safe. They have also talked about the way feeling of community will make them feel safe in that area which is not happening here. Seher however does not want to move, she thinks it would be better if she stays here till

finishing class twelfth. For her belonging has different connotation than her parents, she feels comfortable in her school from where a lot of her friends also come.

She also does not think changing schools will help her studies. Her mother is of the same opinion about the school but not the living condition. 'It would be best if we could just move' she says, 'it would be good for the children and for us, what if something like that happened here, who will look after us' she implored. When she was asked about the reason that she believes moving closer to place of incident will help her, she thinks before suggesting that 'being with the same ones help'. For her belonging is rooted in a far off sense of identity that is seemingly under attack in the current accommodation. Are there are no everyday acts that might make her feel safe here? This is not true, according to her she felt a rupture in the everyday sense of belonging when her religious identity was foregrounded by the neighbours. That is when the break in the feeling of trust and safety happened. There obviously is a role of popular media, she notices that '...I see that a public discourse of discomfort is generated by the media and other sources that has motivated my family to make a decision of moving in - which they did not wanted to make because of school...' School tends to come up in the discussion but it is not essentially a deciding factor for them to stay. What needs to be discussed further in some study is that if the feeling of fear and belonging has a relation with class of a community. This discussion however shows that there is strong and significant relation of fear and identity (and identification) that occurs in a specific socio-political context in a school and an urban area. The experience of violence by children is significantly and rightly influenced by these contexts. The bias that is an undercurrent in the school system significantly influences the feeling social capital in form of trust and belonging.

Reflections

Identity is not a biological construct, rather a sociological one. This paper points out that the issues around identity should be studied not as an automatic construct rather around being identified especially in schools. The structures of identification are usually informed by the stereotypes which results in various arguments about the social exclusion of a community, in present case- the Muslims. De Haan & Kabeer argue that 'Social exclusion is primarily defined as the rupture of a social bond-which is cultural and moral-between the individual and society' (2008:5). In the context of Social Capital theory of Putnam, the exclusion that the children of Muslim community feel in the school results from breaking of faith at various levels. By pointing out children for their belief system or name school creates an environment of mistrust. In some case when this feeling becomes intolerable children tend to withdraw from the schools. In some cases parents play an important role in this drop-out. A single event however as in case of Anam is ignored to create a sense of peace. The sense of belonging is a complex idea that must be understood by keeping the socio-economic position of the child.

In the discussion of the cases above, there is a prevailing discussion on the location of the child vis-à-vis the incident and Muslim neighbourhood. The neighbourhood is a key term in this whole deliberation. In an urban space where Muslims live in large numbers has a specific connotation for other people. It hangs like a tag of belonging and identity on a person. Every experience hence refer to that tag irrespective of the location and nature. Numaid and Anam have different experiences than Munner or Shazia. The latter

mentioned that their location in a Muslim dominated area along with the fact that they went to a certain type of educational institutions influence their experiences. In the case of other two the distance played to their favour. There is certainly a relationship between the place one stays in and the kind of identity based experience they have. All of respondents have faced questions about their religious belonging but it created trauma and problems only for the ones in a specific locality.

The Report of Sacchar Committee has shown that poverty is not the reason for keeping students out of the education system. While working in the area, it was noted that the observation is true for many Muslim families. According to them, getting their children educated in a mainstream school is problematic not because of financial issues, but their children feel more safe when going to a nearby Madarsa, or a school nearby a Muslim dominated area. Simply because 'we' (referring to Muslims) are more here' was the response of Seher's father. However not all Muslims students will drop out of schools, there are ways of resistance that they show to affirm their identity and challenge the authority. Many decided to wear the visual markers to let them be identified as Muslims, some restricted themselves to a group of a few people of the same faith to avoid interaction with others.

As shown by the narratives it is interesting to point out that the experiences Muslim students are varied in their schools. Also the way of they talk about the experiences are also different. A significant thesis that comes along is that there is a gap in the present understanding about ghettoization of Muslims in Delhi. Deciding to move to a ghettoised area is complex issue that needs to be addressed by bringing in discussions about class along with development of real estate opportunities in National Capital Region, as in case of Anam's family in Noida. Muslim families belonging to higher and middle class are exercising their choice to move out of a Muslim dominated urban area. Due to the new trends of real estate development they have an opportunity to move to a rented accommodation or buy properties. Moving to a different location is also a complicated issue. By pointing out that the feeling of security comes from identity the respondents also maintain that it is accompanied by stereotyping and profiling. Any discussion around the issue of identity brings out both type of reactions. Belonging hence is a construct that derives from various sources along with producing complicated reactions.

Through this paper, it is argued that schools are also a system of approval and dismissal that create social capital in form of belonging and trust. There is an underlying culture of sanctions on the basis of identity. During such time that a communally loaded incident happens schools tend to get influenced by the media narration. This influences the experiences of the students in the school. This however is not a common narrative. While doing field work it was found that Muslims experience education and space is varied form. It was also found that there is close relation between identity, urban space and education of Muslim children. The complex nature of the debate must acknowledge the variation in the forms of identity and identification that Muslim students face by being in one place or living.

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