ETHNOGRAPHIES OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S LIVES AND THE INVISIBILITY OF VIOLENCE: A STUDY OF SELECT DISTRICTS OF WEST BENGAL

THESIS SUBMITTED TO JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (ARTS)
2025

BY
FAUZIA JAVED

UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF
PROFESSOR KAMARAN MK MONDAL
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

15th September 2025

Certified that the Thesis Titled

"Ethnographies of Muslim Women's Lives and the Invisibility of Violence: A Study of Select Districts of West Bengal", submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Dr. Kamaran MK Mondal, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University.

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

Countersigned by the

Supervisor: KMMondal

Dated: 15.09.2025

Dr. Kamaran M.K. Mondal
Professor
Department of International Relations
Jadavpur University
Kolkata – 700 032

Candidate: Fauzia Javed

Dated: 15.09.2025

Dedicated to

My beloved Abbu and my best friend.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The journey of writing this thesis has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life. While the process has often been solitary, it has never been one that I have walked alone. This work, in its present form, is possible only because of the guidance, patience, and compassion of many people who stood by me, both within the academic sphere and beyond. I wish to take this space to honor them with gratitude, even though no words can ever fully capture the depth of my appreciation.

First and foremost, I owe my deep respect and sincere thanks to my supervisor, Professor Kamaran M. K. Mondal, for his valuable academic guidance and support throughout my research. His thoughtful feedback and academic expertise significantly shaped this work.

I extend special thanks to Dr. Shiladitya Chakraborty, my external expert, for his generous intellectual support and for extending his help at any point of time during my research. His deep understanding of the subject and readiness to engage in meaningful discussions provided me clarity and motivation.

I must express my profound gratitude to Professor Imankalyan Lahiri, whose unwavering and unconditional support during my most difficult times proved to be a pillar of strength. His kindness and encouragement kept me focused and resilient throughout this demanding journey.

My sincere thanks go to Professor B. K. Das, Head of the Department and internal expert, for his prompt and honest guidance, which often provided the clarity I needed when faced with hesitation.

I am grateful to Mehuli di and Manojit da, whose warmth and readiness to help eased many bureaucratic hurdles and offered reassurance at crucial stages.

I extend my appreciation to all my teachers and mentors; whose unique insights and encouragement shaped my intellectual journey

My academic journey would not have been possible without the quiet yet significant presence of Partha Da, our librarian. Saddam for his support when I needed, making this process smoother and more manageable.

I am deeply grateful to dearest Arfa, Sana, and those pure hearts, whose curiosity, patience, and encouragement reminded me of the larger purpose behind my research. Their belief in me rekindled my own faith, especially during moments of doubt.

I owe my deepest thanks to the women who welcomed me into their lives during my fieldwork.

Equally important are the gatekeepers who made my entry into the field possible. Their trust and guidance opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed, allowing me to approach the communities I sought to understand with respect and acceptance.

No work of this nature can be completed without the unwavering support of my family and Ammi. To them, and especially to my beloved Abbu, who passed away during this journey, I owe everything. Their patience with my silences, acceptance of my absences, and constant belief in me formed the unseen foundation of this thesis. Their sacrifices, hopes, and love shaped every word I wrote here. Their memories remain the quiet strength that carried me forward.

Alongside them, I wish to remember the lost souls who shaped me with their love and care. Their absence created silences in my life, yet their impact echoes in my choices, values, and resilience. Though they are no longer present to witness this achievement, their influence is deeply etched in this work.

I must also thank my dearest friend Shiv, whose support words can scarcely describe. In my most difficult times, when despair consumed me, this friend remained relentless in their care, holding space for my breakdowns without judgment. Their unwavering presence has been a light guiding me back to myself, and this thesis bears the mark of that support.

Finally, there is one constant I cannot fail to acknowledge: Bhairavi. To call you a guide, friend, or support would underestimate the depth of your presence in this journey. Whether three in the morning or six at dawn, you were there—listening, questioning, holding, and reminding me that I was not alone. Every sentence I wrote owes something to your persistence and care. You became the unseen co-traveler in this research, and I hope these words reflect the quiet enormity of your role.

This acknowledgment, though written in pages, is truly boundless. To each person who accompanied me on this journey—named here, quietly supporting me in the background, or no longer physically present—I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude. If this thesis stands today as a finished work, it is because of the community of care, compassion, memory, and resilience that surrounded me. I remain deeply humbled and thankful.

PREFACE

This thesis presents a comprehensive ethnographic examination of the daily lives of Muslim women in West Bengal, focusing on both rural and urban contexts, with particular emphasis on Bankura, Hooghly, Kolkata, and Metiabruz. Conducted over a period of three years, the research investigates the interconnected effects of structural marginalisation, patriarchal oppression, economic deprivation, and Islamophobic discrimination on women's everyday lives, aspirations, and forms of resistance.

The study introduces the concept of Accumulative Invisible Violence (AIV), developed organically from the ethnographic field, to describe how repeated, subtle, and frequently overlooked acts of exclusion, neglect, and systemic bias accumulate over time, resulting in sustained harm and diminished agency. AIV offers a conceptual framework that moves beyond conventional binaries of visible/invisible or structural/interpersonal violence, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of how marginalisation is both experienced and perpetuated.

Methodologically, the research is grounded in extensive ethnographic fieldwork, comprising in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, walking interviews, and photo-elicitation involving over 80 Muslim women. This methodological approach enabled the capture of embodied, complex, and often contradictory experiences, while allowing reflexive engagement with the researcher's positionality.

The findings reveal significant rural-urban disparities. In rural areas, women are primarily affected by severe poverty, limited access to government welfare schemes, inadequate healthcare and education, and early marriage customs, which are closely tied to patriarchal social structures. In urban settings, challenges include ghettoization, housing discrimination, systemic exclusion from formal employment, and direct Islamophobic harassment in public spaces, educational institutions, and workplaces. Structural violence is normalized across both settings, with discriminatory practices often accepted and internalized as routine.

This research contributes to academic debates on gender, religion, marginalisation, and violence by providing an empirically grounded and theoretically informed analysis of

intersecting forms of oppression in India's postcolonial context. It argues for the need to move beyond grand theoretical abstractions and statistical generalisations, emphasizing situated, context-specific understandings of systemic inequality and the agency of marginalised individuals.

Ultimately, the thesis calls on scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to engage attentively with the voices of marginalised women, treating their individual experiences not merely as isolated cases, but as emblematic of broader systemic injustices.

Fauzia Javed
Jadavpur University, Kolkata

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ..... **i**

PREFACE ..... **iii**

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION **1**

CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY **31**

CHAPTER 3
UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AND MUSLIM WOMEN'S QUESTION **48**

CHAPTER 4
LIVED EXPERIENCE AND EVERYDAY REALITIES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN WEST BENGAL **79**

CHAPTER 5
INTERPRETING LIVED EXPERIENCES: ANALYTICAL INSIGHTS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT **133**

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS **179**

REFERENCES **189**

APPENDICES **206**

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In an era dominated by images of war, conflict, and hardship, the concept of 'violence' has become both vital and unavoidable. Violence has occupied a central position in mainstream discourses for centuries, as it shapes how identities are constructed and how laws and authority function. This in turn leads to the formation of subjects, which eventually leads to gender, position, and status formation too, through rigid norms (Butler 2009:167). Scholars of the state argues that violence acts as the driving force for the creation of structures, and sanctions authority. It can express themselves in non-obvious ways that don't fit into conventional definitions of war, crime, or abuse (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004:1–5).

Collins (2008:8), observes that wars, and other means of confrontational or say police aggression takes a patterned path, which leads to explosion of force. However, if one observes, the atrocities of our world is often either highly publicized and sensationalized by the media or conveniently hidden due to bureaucratic red tapism and social apathy. Violence accounts as one of the leading causes of death globally. It is a pandemic claiming the lives of about 1.6 million people every single year. WHO defines violence as,

> *"The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation." (*World Health Organization [WHO], 2002: 5).

Based on this definition, violence against any individual is a matter of human rights. Sexual and gender-based violence against women, in any form, signifies a major global crisis. But the question is, do Muslim women really need to be saved? If yes, from whom then. Approaching violence in this lens, often allows us to identify how power created and disbursed in the society.

In South Asia, women have been subject to widespread violence encompassing physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuses that are deeply embedded in societal norms, religious practices, and cultural beliefs, which perpetuate patriarchal

power structures and subjugate women from all backgrounds, including those from marginalised and minority groups. Reports says that one in three women globally will suffer intimate partner violence at some point in their lifetime. Further, approximately around, 38% of women had been murdered by their husbands (WHO, 2017). Survey conducted by the UN states, that 18% of women and young women aged 15 through 49 in partnerships with men suffered actual violence (UNDOCS, 2019). The statistics do not fully capture the various forms of violence experienced by women, encompassing actions like harassment, assault, and abduction, amongst other violent acts.

My decision to study violence stems from a practical understanding of how it manifests in the form of everyday omissions and refusals. Not as conflict zones, where their homes are located in designated war areas, and their properties are damaged by bombings, or their bodies marked by artillery fire. Rather, I am interested in the lives of those humans who are also marked by similarly profound scars. Girls who are taken out of school due to family honour, women whose illnesses are left untreated because their brother's health is prioritised, and girls who excel academically but are forced into early marriage often do not appear in official statistics or crime reports. To onlookers, they may seem unremarkable, even mundane; to those who experience them, they are corrosive and have a gradual, building effect. Despite an unprecedented amount of information available and widespread human rights activism, certain forms of violence continue to be nearly invisible.

I encountered a more subtle and damaging form of violence in my interactions with Muslim women in West Bengal. These women were not residing in areas officially designated as war zones. This was a violence born of denial.

The invisibility of these individuals is not caused by their absence, but rather due to a persistent lack of recognition, a failure that affects states, institutions, communities, and even the survivors themselves (Farmer, 2004: 307–309). It is the violence that gradually accumulates over days, years, and a person's lifetime, rather than manifesting suddenly in a single incident (Nixon, 2011:2).

Violence is often embedded in everyday structures, interactions, and bureaucracies – harm so normalised that those experiencing it may not even label it as "violence" (Das, 2007:11–14). In homes, where mothers weigh ambition against family honour, daughters show restraint in the face of curiosity, and every act of independence is scrutinized against unspoken guidelines. In various streets and markets, women exhibit

a cautious demeanor, perpetually mindful of the all-seeing eyes of others, as they endeavour to comply with the norms that severely limit and control their lives. The damage is incremental, interconnected, and deeply ingrained—invisible forms of violence that fail to garner major media attention but steadily undermine personal autonomy, self-determination, and self-respect over time. This thesis queries, whether we have been searching in the correct locations. What it means to be visible – inquiring: who determines what constitutes violence? Who receives recognition for their pain? What types of injury fall outside the parameters of standard policy, legislation, or even the narratives of resistance movements?

In the sociological imagination, violence is often conceptualized as physical, episodic, or overt (Galtung, 1969). Gendered marginalisation contexts are further aggravated by the intersection of patriarchal norms, communal identity, and socio-economic stratification (Crenshaw,1991:1244–1246). Violence against minority groups, particularly Muslim women, not only conveys a disturbing reality but also highlights the additional hurdle of silencing these individuals. Despite extensive public awareness efforts, legislative action, and advocacy campaigns against violence, violence against women continues to be widely accepted and prevalent. The normalization of violence against women within Indian society creates an atmosphere in which Muslim women are more likely to encounter violence; it also perpetuates the structural disparities they encounter. According to Veena Das (2007:15–18), violence typically becomes a normal part of daily life and loses its sense of importance once it is ordinary.

In West Bengal and other similar states, the intersection of gender and religious identity creates a uniquely vulnerable environment for Muslim women, where discriminatory practices seamlessly integrate into everyday life, complicating efforts to spark collective outrage. These acts are not isolated incidents; they form part of a recurring environment that perpetuates exclusion and reduces opportunities for a better life (Bourdieu, 2001:34–38). However, they frequently avoid being categorised as "violence" in legal, journalistic, and policy contexts because they lack the urgency of physical assault.

The contemporary world is marked by growing majoritarian politics, polarised public debate, and a global climate of securitisation. In India, the relationship between religious identity and citizenship, welfare access, and public affiliation has become more complex in recent times (Jaffrelot, 2021:92–95).

In this context, Muslim women experience a contradictory situation of being both highly visible as symbols in political discourse and completely unseen in their real-life daily hardships (Khan, 2018:142–144). Feminist scholarship worldwide has cautioned against concentrating solely on high-profile violence, overlooking the 'slow' and 'structural' forms that frequently underpin and facilitate it (Nixon, 2011:2–3; Galtung, 1969:168–171). Even within established frameworks, there's a tendency to generalize women's experiences by reducing them to either domestic abuse stories or general societal issues, ignoring the complex ways damage accumulates over time.

During periods of physical warfare, insidious, covert violence can become more apparent. Attention is focused on conflict zones and refugee crises, meanwhile, the problems that occur in areas perceived as peaceful are often unnoticed (Nordstrom, 1997:23–26). Marginalised women face the double effect of their struggles being silenced: initially through their social invisibility, and subsequently by the overshadowing of more dramatic forms of suffering. The current situation necessitates a fundamental change in our understanding. It is a misperception of the nature of violence, itself to concentrate only on observable violations of human rights. In reality, many remarkable manifestations represent the culmination of long cycles of covert violence.

Study Area:

The proposed research will be situated in West Bengal, a state situated in the eastern part of India. As stated in the 2011 Census, West Bengal contains roughly 7.54 percent of the country's entire population. The geographical landscape is notable for its unique shape: it narrows as it extends northwards in a narrowing triangular form, but its southern base broadens out into the deltaic plains. Strategically, the norther corridor plays a vital role in connecting the North Eastern India for supporting the economic and infrastructural development.

Within a larger South Asian context, the positioning of the state has been historically influenced, imbibing in the cultural, political, and economic aspects. The political history of West Bengal is significantly influenced by the 1947 Partition, which separated the former province of Bengal and incorporated its western section as an independent and secular state within the Indian Union. The partition not only redrew

territorial lines, but also left lasting legacies of displacement, migration, and communal fears that continue to influence the region's social fabric. Administratively, the state has undergone several reorganisations over time, with the most recent being the formation of Alipurduar district in 2014. The state's internal governance framework is shaped by its size and multiculturalism. West Bengal is divided into 66 sub-divisions, 341 Community Development Blocks, 121 municipalities, and six municipal corporations, which provides a multi-tiered system of administration that caters to both its rural areas and urban conglomerations. Currently, West Bengal is comprised of 20 districts, with Kolkata serving as both the state capital and the most prominent metropolitan centre of eastern India.

The state is structured into three divisions for more comprehensive jurisdictional control.

- The Bardhaman Division consists of Bardhhaman, Bankura, Birbhum, Purba Medinipur, Paschim Medinipur, Purulia, and Hooghly districts.
- The Presidency Division encompasses Murshidabad, Nadia, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Howrah, and Kolkata.
- The Jalpaiguri Division comprises Maldah, Dakshin Dinajpur, Uttar Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Koch Bihar, and Darjeeling districts.

My proposed field sites are situated in the South 24 Parganas region, specifically Metiabruz, in the Kolkata district, Hooghly, and Bankura. Despite their varying socio-economic profiles and historical paths, these districts are connected by the limited amount of thorough research on Muslim lives. The area of Metiabruz stands out for its historical ties to migrant workers, unregulated economies, and a highly concentrated Muslim population, thereby illustrating how even small-scale exclusion at the structural level is deeply experienced. As the central metropolitan capital, Kolkata serves as a place of growth and economic opportunities, yet reveals deep inequalities and mask communal tensions. Hooghly, with its combination of rural settlements and industrial areas, demonstrates the complex interplay between economic transformation and social marginalization. Meanwhile, Bankura, situated in the more rural hinterland, offers an insight into the ways in which violence manifests in areas characterized by both economic hardship and cultural diversity.

Figure 1.1: Map of West Bengal (Source: Maps of India)

Statement of the Problem:

Discussions on violence have extended beyond the battlefield, in the early 21st century. Scholars acknowledged that harm is not limited to bloodshed or visible brutality alone. Even within progressive legal and policy frameworks, a persistent bias towards spectacular violence continues to exist, as noted by Galtung (1969:168–169). Nixon (2011:2), observed that, institutions often undermines the slow, scattered or deeply ingrained violence. The lack of visibility of Muslim women in Bengal is not coincidental; it stems from a complex interaction of socio-economic disadvantage, religious prejudice, and male domination (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 199–201; Sen & Dhawan, 2012:45–46).

What constitutes then as harm, is often not classified as "violence" within official or academic discourses. Events such as being denied welfare benefits due to technical issues, being removed from voter lists, excluded from neighbourhood decision-making spaces, or silenced in public forums may seem insignificant on their own, but their combined impact undermines dignity, autonomy, and life prospects (Farmer, 2004:307–308). Galtung (1992: 292) opines that such processes align with his concept of structural violence, which he described as injuries embedded within social systems, reproduced without a single identifiable perpetrator.

The lack of these forms of harm in main narratives is partly attributed to the metrics used to measure violence. Crime statistics and human rights reports typically demand clear culprits, isolated events, and measurable damages. This epistemic framing excludes the 'soft weapons' of systemic neglect, bureaucratic hostility, and cultural silencing (Crenshaw, 1991: 1244-1245). The harm continues, but without acknowledgment it is inaccessible to the very frameworks intended to mitigate it.

The marginalisation of these women is compounded by their position of religious minorities, and the gendered constraints that follows. The thesis begins with the premise that unless this form of violence is acknowledged and re-conceptualized, it will remain under researched in the broader academic and political debates. It becomes a necessity to address its manifestation in all its form. West Bengal has a substantial Muslim community residing within its borders. Despite public awareness campaigns, anti-violence laws, and advocacy efforts, violence against women persists ubiquitously.

The normalization of violence contributes to an environment in which Muslim women are susceptible to experience violence, thereby also perpetuating it further, as they encounter. It is essential to understand the distinct challenges encountered by the women of the Muslim community, in identifying the systemic system that expose them to discriminatory acts. This thesis does not originate from statistical anomalies or sudden crises, but rather from the dense and unyielding nature of everyday suffering. As Spivak (1998:287) explains, the moral responsibility involved in conceptualising such violence. Data and narratives collected in the field, patterns identified in state data, and silences in public discourse all point to a single pressing issue: the necessity to acknowledge and examine harm that is currently being overlooked. For the purpose of the research, the term harm and violence, are deliberately utilised interchangeably. This helps the research to comprehend the reality. The experiences observed unfolds a continuum including the subtle, less visible everyday marginalisation of the Muslim women.

Identification of the Problem:

Violence against women is not a recent phenomenon and does not occur only during periods of war and conflict. Historically, the silences surrounding these harms are not coincidental; they are created and maintained by the same systems that claim to provide protection (Crenshaw, 1991:1244). This phenomenon of invisibility operates on multiple levels. At the institutional level, systems for reporting by states, legal frameworks, and statistical measures often acknowledge violence only when it is blatant, overlooking recurring patterns of discrimination, exclusion, or deprivation that emerge over extended periods of time (Spivak, 1988: 285; Yuval-Davis, 2006: 197). In cultural contexts, societal expectations of shame, respectability, and honour often force women to conceal their experiences, particularly within minority or marginalised groups (Sen & Dhawan, 2012:43). Repeated instances of micro-aggressions at the interpersonal level, such as being spoken over, ignored, or subtly undermined, ultimately contribute to a pervasive erosion of dignity (Galtung, 1990:293).

The particular situation in Bengal highlights these dynamics more evidently. Their daily lives are influenced not only by the patriarchal limitations within their communities, but also by structural marginalization in the broader socio-political context (Jeffery & Basu, 1996:15; Robinson, 2013: 72).

The issue at hand is not only the existence of such violence, but also its lack of recognition, quantification, and subsequent lack of discussion within mainstream culture. The absence of these records often results in their being given low priority and easily disputed (Farmer, 2004:308). Our comprehension of violence stays incomplete, and consequently, our reactions are also limited, since we lack conceptual frameworks to grasp the complex and temporally scattered consequences of these actions.

Literature Review:

This literature review aims to comprehend the violence experienced by Muslim women. Understanding the impact of violence on Muslim women in India, can help highlight the many challenges they experience on a daily basis. This review will examine various scholarly studies that have investigated the factors leading to structural violence against Muslim women, along with the resulting consequences for their lives. In India, Muslim communities have experienced targeted physical assaults, often during periods of majoritarian rule. Violence against Muslim women has escalated to alarming levels, sparking concerns about their rights within both state institutions and their own communities. Research shows violence against Muslim women in India, is influenced by a complex and interconnected web of factors rather than just a factor of faith.

The complexities surrounding these women in India are multifaceted, spanning social, cultural, legal, and economic aspects, necessitating an intersectional approach to fully understand their intricate circumstances. Scholarship on these challenges has increasingly shifted beyond common stereotypes, incorporating detailed empirical research, feminist reinterpretations of Islamic texts, and analyses of systemic marginalization. Factors behind the compounding effects of marginalisation on these women has been a serious academic discourse. However, even the Government reports and commissions have meticulously analysed the reason behind their marginality. This literature review has been done thematically to identify the gap.

(i) Conceptualizing Violence: From the Visible to the Invisible

Violence occurs in various forms, with unique patterns in both time and social context. Violence that can be seen is obvious, attention-grabbing, and easily understood by the public. The incidents include riots, physical assaults, sexual violence, lynchings, and

other episodes of communal conflict (Galtung, 1969; Das, 2007). The visibility of the act stems not only from the act, but by the capacity to mediate through the observation, documentation, commemorated through historical accounts, media representation and misrepresentation, and political dialogue (Young, 1997; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004).

In contrast, invisible violence is subtle, accumulative, and frequently becomes accepted as normal. It inhabits ordinary environments: being left out of education, experiencing humiliation in educational settings, limited movement, ongoing monitoring, biased employment practices, and the unspoken issues women face within domestic or social contexts. Invisible violence permeates the everyday, without causing a sudden disruption. The power of this phenomenon stems from its intangibility—it often goes unnoticed as a form of "violence" in traditional definitions, yet it consistently undermines dignity, a sense of belonging, and personal control over the long term.

Johan Galtung's (1969) distinction between direct and structural violence serves as a conceptual starting point. Structural violence typically emphasizes systemic inequalities, such as poverty, illiteracy, and malnutrition, but it often overlooks the direct, personal experience of suffering. According to Veena Das (2007), violence transcends singular incidents, permeating the daily routines of life, thereby influencing how individuals communicate, behave, and physically inhabit their environments. Violence becomes imperceptible when it becomes commonplace.

Feminist historians from South Asia have further refined this framework. Menon and Bhasin (1998) and Butalia (1998) demonstrate that during the Partition era, sexual violence was both highly visible (via abduction and rape) and remained largely suppressed in public remembrance. The findings of their analyses expose a fundamental contradiction: the physical ferocity of violence is inescapable, yet its recollection is shrouded in shame, social disgrace, and patriotic storylines. The dynamic interplay between spectacle and silence sets the stage for comprehending the hidden, cumulative injuries sustained by Muslim women in Bengal.

These foundational frameworks, which focus on critical engagement, provide insights into structural and everyday violence but remain largely theoretical constructs. Das's concept of the everyday is insightful, but her ethnographic focus, mainly on urban

Delhi, restricts its relevance to the particulars of regional, religious, and gendered marginalization in Bengal (Pandey, 2001; Chakrabarti, 2018). The existing literature provides useful theoretical frameworks, but falls short of accurately depicting the everyday experiences of Muslim women in this specific area.

(ii) Exploring the Impact of Divided Histories on Collective Trauma

In 1947, the Partition of Bengal initiated a prolonged period of communal unrest during which Muslim women disproportionately shouldered the heaviest loads. Documented by Menon and Bhasin (1998) and Butalia (1998) are instances of abductions, sexual violence, and forced conversions across the subcontinent, including Bengal. According to Chatterji (2007), the Partition was marked by a series of displacement waves in Bengal, with Muslim women frequently being the most vulnerable migrants.

Research by Das (1990) reveals that post-Partition "repatriation" projects, supposedly intended to rescue abducted women, frequently perpetuated patriarchal violence by treating women as communal property and silencing their voices under the guise of "honour." In Bengal, economic marginalisation contributed to such silencing. According to Datta (2012), Muslim women who were displaced by Partition found themselves in insecure labour markets, working in sectors such as bidi-rolling and agricultural wage labour, with limited access to education and healthcare. The exclusions documented in policy reports such as the Sachar Committee (2006) led to intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Historiographical studies of the Bengal partition have significantly highlighted the struggles of women, yet Muslim women from Bengal continue to be underrepresented. The majority of attention is concentrated on Punjab and North India, with Bengal relegated to the periphery (Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2003). When Bengal is studied, individual voices are often overlooked in favour of community perspectives, resulting in fragmented or absent women's testimonies. Historical accounts often recognize the hardships women have endured, yet frequently fail to draw a clear link between these past difficulties and their continued battles with entrenched and invisible forms of violence.

(iii) Socio-cultural Challenges and Identity:

In Bengal, Muslim women are often portrayed not as independent individuals but as symbolic representatives of their community's values. Narratives of state and policy frequently reinforce this symbolic role. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) provided a landmark assessment of socio-economic indicators for Muslims in India, mainly focusing on women's status through literacy, fertility, and workforce participation, thus simplifying intricate lived experiences to metrics of underdevelopment. According to Roy (2016), the Bengali woman framed in official discourse is implicitly Hindu and middle-class, implying that Muslim women are anomalies or deviations from the normative concept of citizenhood. These narratives obscure women's agency and do not accurately represent the diversity of experiences within the community.

Despite such structural and symbolic constraints, Muslim women actively assert their agency in restricted environments. Stadlen's (2018) research shows that women use strategic approaches with Islamic reform networks, microfinance schemes, and community-based projects to gain social standing, financial resources, and a degree of independence. This agency operates subtly through ordinary actions rather than open acts of disobedience, demonstrating that resistance is frequently embedded in mundane practices rather than dramatic displays. Jeffery and Qureshi (2022) highlight that a "Muslim woman" should not be viewed as a single, uniform group; her identities are instead influenced by the complex interactions of class, caste, region, and generational status. Representation studies are often critical of how Muslim women are portrayed externally, yet frequently overlook the ways women themselves tell their stories and shape their identities, sometimes idealising their autonomy without considering the impact of underlying structural limitations (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

The socio-political marginalisation of Muslim women is further exacerbated by various interconnected forms of disadvantage. They occupy a unique position at the intersection of gender, religion, class, and caste, making them susceptible to exploitation in both the larger Hindu-dominated social and political environment and within the patriarchal systems within their own communities. A study by Menon and Hasan (2011) titled Unequal Citizens shows that Muslim women experience dual exclusion: internal patriarchal control and external systemic bias. Statistics from the study's large-scale survey indicate significant disparities in education, employment, health, and political

participation, demonstrating ongoing structural neglect. While these quantitative accounts highlight inequality, they do not fully convey the everyday realities of women dealing with these limitations, indicating the necessity for qualitative and ethnographic research.

Historical and ethnographic research offer further depth and complexity. According to Menon (1981), an investigation of Muslim women in Kerala revealed that education improved their social status, although customary practices like purdah and early marriage hindered educational achievement and political participation. Higher educational attainment is linked to parental income and social standing, but women's opportunities to make their own choices were still limited by social and family obligations. This analysis is expanded by Madan (1996) to the broader social structure of Indian Muslims, demonstrating how communal norms and gendered power dynamics influence women's mobility and participation in public life. Kirmani (2009) highlights the disparity between women's real-life experiences and the typical depictions in the media, stressing that women's autonomy and defiance are frequently concealed in public accounts. Mernissi (1991) historically situates these dynamics, tracing the shifts in gender relations and religious interpretations that have influenced women's roles within Muslim communities. These studies point out, that socio-cultural obstacles confronting Muslim women are intricately entrenched within the interlinking frameworks of religion, community conventions, and more extensive societal prejudice. Despite current analyses, there remains a need for further intersectional studies that take into account caste, class, and regional diversity within Muslim communities.

(iv)Religious and Legal Frameworks

The relationship between religion and law has a significant impact on the socio-political standing of Muslim women in India, affecting both their possibilities and limitations. Singh's (1992) research on Women in Muslim Personal Law reveals the enduring conflicts between religious traditionalism and gender equality. Singh critically examines how interpretations of Muslim personal law typically reinforce gender hierarchies, thereby restricting women's rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The study highlights the difficulty of balancing religious identity with constitutional protections of equality.

Siddiqui's 1987 study further enhances understanding of the social profile of Muslim women by examining the influence of religious orthodoxy on both everyday practices and societal expectations. Siddiqui's research shows that following traditional values perpetuates the separation of men and women and hinders women's involvement in public life, usually under the pretext of religious devotion.

In the 1985 study by Asghar Engineer, the author positions these legal constraints within a broader social-religious context, contending that deeply ingrained patriarchal structures within Muslim societies contribute to women's subordination beyond the realm of formal law. He stresses the significance of community leaders and religious interpretations in influencing gender norms, which frequently defy reform initiatives. He examines the broader challenges encountered by Muslims in India, with a particular focus on the problems faced by Muslim women. In the opinion of the engineer, Muslims are unconvinced by the notion that women can better themselves in their commitment to their faith. He argues that the hurdle to the advancement of Muslim women is rooted within the religious framework and social hierarchies of the community. From his viewpoint, there is a reluctance among Muslims to educate women are apprehensive as they would conflict with the principles contained in the Quran.

Mukrram Ahmed (2008) explores the conflict between Muslim women's religious duties and Indian secular law, focusing on the disputes that occur due to the coexistence of different legal systems. Ahmed's analysis criticizes the state's reluctance to intervene in personal law issues and the communal resistance to legal reforms that are intended to promote gender equality.

These works collectively illustrate how religious and legal frameworks intersect, producing complex terrains of oppression and negotiation for Muslim women. Existing literature frequently portrays Muslim personal law as a single, uniform entity, disregarding the diversity within the community and the changing role of women working towards reform. There is an urgent requirement for research that captures these dynamics with subtlety and positions legal discussions within more extensive socio-political frameworks.

(v) Structural Violence and Gendered Oppression

The concept of structural violence offers a critical perspective for understanding the systemic and frequently unseen mechanisms that maintain the oppression of Muslim women in India. A study by Parul Sinha et al. in 2017 defines structural violence as societal structures within political and economic systems that deliberately disadvantage minority groups, resulting in harm extending beyond direct physical harm. Their work highlights the integral role of institutional neglect and socio-economic deprivation in perpetuating gendered marginalization.

According to Khan, A. (2014), this framework is applied to South Asian contexts, where violence against marginalised women, including Muslim women, takes the form of both physical and symbolic acts, which are deeply entrenched in caste, class, and religious systems of inequality. Khan claims that such violence is not only perpetrated by individuals but also by state policies and societal structures that condone exclusion and discrimination.

Dey S. (2019) conducts an intersectional examination of gender violence in India, highlighting the heightened exposures experienced by Muslim women resulting from the convergence of multiple identities. Critics argue that mainstream feminist theories frequently overlook aspects of religion and ethnicity, consequently making the experiences of Muslim women invisible or misinterpreted. The study advocates for a comprehensive analytical approach that considers communal tensions, gendered violence, and socio-political exclusion.

Government reports support these academic viewpoints by recording the frequency of violence against Muslim women in both domestic and communal settings. There is a significant disparity in the effective implementation of policies and legal protection, which has led to continued impunity for those responsible and marginalization of the affected individuals.

These studies collectively highlight the requirement for strategies that extend beyond legislative changes to address entrenched systemic disparities and the societal and political climate surrounding violence against Muslim women. Integrating intersectionality into policy and practice is also stressed as a matter of urgent priority to develop comprehensive protective systems.

(vi) Education, Empowerment, and Social Mobility:

Education is widely regarded as a crucial route to empowerment and social advancement for marginalized communities, such as Muslim women in India. Research by Nivedita Menon (1981) on women in Kerala's Muslim community shows that high levels of educational attainment can lead to substantial changes in societal attitudes towards men and women, along with their economic participation. Menon's empirical research shows that education not only enhances individual autonomy but also challenges traditional patriarchal values in Muslim communities. Menon's empirical work demonstrates that education not only boosts individual autonomy but also disrupts traditional patriarchal norms within Muslim societies.

This analysis is further expanded by Chatterjee (2015) to consider Muslim women's educational decisions within contexts of institutionalised marginalisation. Institutional biases and socio-economic constraints restrict access to quality education, thus sustaining cycles of marginalization. Chatterjee emphasizes the significance of community-based organizations in providing educational opportunities and countering the effects of exclusion.

Hamzeh,M (2011) sheds light on the symbolic and political aspects of hijab discussions amongst Muslim female students in the Indian subcontinent. Hamzeh's qualitative interviews reveal that the hijab serves as a double indicator: it represents religious affiliation on one side, while on the other side, it is the centre of conflicts over personal freedom, self-improvement, and social acceptance. The insight highlights how everyday practices of religious expression are connected to broader social and political forces, showing how Muslim women deal with, refuse, and compromise structural and cultural obstacles in their lives. These negotiations in the context of West Bengal demonstrate a complex interplay between gendered expectations, religious policing, and community norms, highlighting how identity, agency, and societal pressures intersect in subtle but substantial ways. According to Ahmad (2001), the relationship between culture and education influences Muslim women's liberation, with Ahmad suggesting that educational empowerment is influenced by socio-cultural norms which can both facilitate and limit women's ambitions. Ahmad's work highlights the significance of educational policies that are sensitive to diverse cultural backgrounds and acknowledge various community settings.

Despite these contributions, there are persist lacuna in knowledge about regional disparities, the differences between rural and urban areas, and the long-term effects of education on socio-economic mobility among Muslim women. The relationship between caste and class within Muslim communities has not been thoroughly examined in terms of its impact on educational achievements.

(vii) The Politics of Silence: Gendered Violence and Subaltern Resistance

Silence has played a crucial role in feminist investigations of violence in South Asia, especially as it affects Muslim women in Bengal. In this context, silence encompasses more than just the lack of speech, being a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that manifests at individual, communal, and institutional levels.

Following the 1947 Partition, widespread and extremely distressing sexual violence against women occurred. Menon and Bhasin (1998) and Butalia (1998) note that such violence was frequently made indecent. Both the state and the community systematically removed it from public discussion, making the experiences of women unacknowledged in historical accounts. The erasure was a deliberate act of silencing, rather than a passive omission, which exacerbated the trauma experienced by the victims.

Desai (2016) further develops this analysis in modern settings, illustrating how silence persists as a tool of coercion. Sexual violence often goes unreported because of the stigma associated with it, and the government frequently exploits women's experiences to serve nationalist interests, thereby contributing to their reluctance to speak out. The dynamic highlights the enduring power structures that shape women's voices and experiences.

In Bengal, a pervading sense of silence defines daily life, particularly among Muslim women who experience harassment and discrimination. According to Datta (2012), women often fail to report such incidents due to fear of ridicule, retaliation, or police indifference. In this context, silence can serve as both a means of survival and a result of coercion. Speaking out in such circumstances can put individuals at risk of further harm. Silence can also serve a political purpose. Women resist being part of narratives that use their suffering by choosing not to speak. A subtle yet formidable form of resistance challenges dominant discourses that aim to define and regulate the identities and experiences of individuals.

Spivak's influential question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988), examines the circumstances under which marginalised voices are given a hearing. Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot express themselves within dominant power structures has been contested for dismissing the significance of silence as a form of agency. For Muslim women in Bengal, silence is more than just a lack of participation - it is a deliberate act of defiance. It is a rejection of the predetermined roles and stories they are expected to follow, allowing them to assert their independence in a society that frequently aims to suppress their voices.

Understanding silence as both a tactic and a means of defiance is vital for a thorough examination of the experiences of Muslim women in Bengal. This challenges the idea that victims are powerless, presenting a more nuanced and empowering story that acknowledges the various ways women can fight back against oppression.

(viii) Post-Violence Contexts and Contemporary Polarisation

The lives of Muslim women in Bengal are deeply influenced by the consequences of communal violence. Historical events, such as the Hooghly riots of 1964, the after effects effects of Bhagalpur in 1989, and the polarisation surrounding the NRC-CAA debates, demonstrate that communal tensions are not isolated or short-term occurrences. Reports by human rights organisations (Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2021) have recorded ongoing vulnerabilities during these outbreaks, which comprise displacement, sexual harassment, economic instability, and the degradation of social connections.

Bengal's communal landscape is characterised by its complex historical development and dependence on socio-political factors. In contrast to states like Gujarat or Uttar Pradesh, communalism in Bengal is influenced by the dynamics of border regions, migration trends, and long-standing syncretic customs (Chatterji, 2007; Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2003). In rural border districts, these factors produce context-specific vulnerabilities, especially for women who face both structural marginalisation and the ongoing legacy of past trauma.

Scholarly engagement continues to be limited and inconsistent. Existing literature situates Muslim women either within the macro-historical aftermath of Partition or relies on quantitative indicators of socio-economic disadvantage, thus leaving micro-

level experiences of post-riot trauma, intergenerational transmission of fear, and the psychic toll of communal polarisation underexplored.

Studies focused on policy offer useful statistical information, but they may undermine women by portraying them as mere indicators of disadvantage, thereby concealing their capacity for action and personal perspectives. The limitations in knowledge highlight the importance of ethnographically based research, which focuses on Muslim women telling their own stories, highlights the subtle forms of exclusion experienced in everyday life, and tracks the ongoing process of identity negotiation in areas affected by violence.

This approach highlights the gradual and cumulative effect of hidden injuries, shifting the focus away from the dramatic displays of violence in riots to examine the ordinary aspects of societal and structural violence.

(ix) Governmental Reports and Policy Perspectives

Government reports have been instrumental in bringing to light the socio-economic circumstances of Muslim communities and shaping policy initiatives designed to improve their situation. The Sachar Committee Report, published in 2006, is a landmark empirical study that documents the educational, economic, and social disparities faced by Muslims in India. This highlights the widespread marginalization of Muslim women, who face low literacy levels, restricted workforce engagement, and exclusion from typical welfare programs. The report advocates for specific policy initiatives to enhance Muslim women's access to education, health, and employment opportunities.

The National Commission on Religious and Linguistic Minorities (2007) further expands its scope by investigating the systemic disadvantages encountered by various minority groups, including Muslims. It advocates for affirmative action that goes beyond the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and recommends frameworks that address inequalities within minority groups. Critics contend that the Commission's proposals have had a limited impact due to political opposition and insufficient implementation frameworks.

The Kundu Report (2015) concentrates on minority education and employment, highlighting the necessity of affirmative policies aimed specifically at Muslim women, particularly in areas with low socio-economic standards. The proposal suggests strengthening vocational training programs and increasing access to post-secondary education.

Despite extensive data and proposed solutions, the circumstances of Muslim women on the ground frequently fail to improve due to shortcomings in policy implementation, insufficient political commitment, and societal and cultural barriers. These documents often consider Muslim women as a single group, ignoring the differences within their community caused by factors such as caste, class, and geography.

Governmental reports offer important empirical evidence and policy guidelines, but academic research suggests that policy development and execution would be more effective if they took a more nuanced, intersectional, and inclusive approach to address the complex marginalization of Muslim women. Despite constitutional guarantees and welfare programs, these reports collectively highlight that policy failures and structural barriers impede the socio-economic advancement of Muslim women.

(x) Contemporary Challenges and Emerging Discourses

Recent academic research indicates that Muslim women in India are still facing a variety of complex problems that are influenced by changing socio-political circumstances, regional differences, and shifting identity politics. Rahim Mondal (2005) provides a significant demographic and social profile of rural Muslim women, drawing attention to persistent shortfalls in health, education, and economic involvement. His work highlights the connection between poverty and gender within marginalised Muslim communities that are largely unrepresented in mainstream conversation.

According to Chaturvedi (2004), the author critically scrutinizes political participation and the increasing prevalence of fundamentalism, investigating how communal tensions affect Muslim women's public involvement and autonomy. Research highlights that political activism frequently retains a male-dominated character, with women's perspectives being overlooked in both their local communities and the wider political arena.

The developing conversation highlights the importance of moving away from seeing Muslim women solely as victims of oppression, towards acknowledging their capacity for agency, resistance, and varied experiences. Despite significant progress, there are still substantial gaps in empirical research regarding regional variations, intersectionality affecting caste and class within Muslim communities, and the complex nature of women's daily negotiations of identity and power. In order to convey the richness of Muslim women's modern life experiences in India, the literature is increasingly calling for the integration of feminist, ethno-political, and intersectional frameworks, moving beyond tokenistic and simplistic policy approaches.

Research Gaps:

Despite significant government reports like the Sachar Committee Report (2006), the Ranganath Mishra Commission Report (2007), and the Kundu Committee Report (2014), there is a notable deficiency in qualitative research concerning the daily lives of Muslim women—particularly in rural and semi-urban areas of West Bengal. Existing literature predominantly focuses on macro-level policy issues and urban populations, frequently neglecting the intricate ways in which gender, caste, religion, and locality interact to influence the experiences of marginalization for Muslim women. This study aims to fill several interconnected gaps—empirical, methodological, theoretical, and demographic—by putting a focus on these underrepresented voices.

A significant disparity in empirical and demographic data exists concerning Muslim women residing in under-researched areas like Bankura and Hooghly, and semi-urban areas such as Metiabruz. Most scholarship treats Muslim communities uniformly, neglecting significant variations stemming from geography and social circumstances, particularly in relation to covert or imperceptible forms of violence.

There still exists a substantial knowledge deficit concerning how structural violence manifests itself in everyday life through gradual, cumulative, and frequently imperceptible processes. Political ethnographies often focus on evident conflicts and overt aggression, overlooking the more subtle, bodily distress that gradually builds up over time due to social isolation and institutional disregard.

Existing research typically relies on surveys and quantitative data, but this approach often fails to offer the in-depth insights that ethnographic methods and immersive

fieldwork can provide. This study employs feminist ethnographic methods, including long-term involvement and in-depth interviews, to shed light on everyday experiences that contradict policy-driven narratives presented from above.

Despite recent welfare schemes implemented following the Sachar Report, insufficient consideration has been paid to the disconnect between these government intentions and the actual experiences of Muslim women at the grassroots level. The limited effect of such initiatives on underlying social disparities is not thoroughly examined through the perspective of personal experiences.

Significant research in sociology, political theory, and gender studies on violence, the everyday experiences of Muslim women in Bengal remain conceptually overlooked and methodologically understudied. Most existing research focuses on dramatic occurrences such as riots, lynchings, and mob violence, or on clear instances of structural exclusion such as ghettoization and disenfranchisement through the law (Jaffrelot & Thomas, 2012; Engineer, 2004; Menon, 2019). These contributions are crucial, but they often overlook the more nuanced, gradual, and institutionally approved forms of harm that do not align with the typical understanding of "violence."

Mainstream social science and state discourses show considerable disparities in acknowledging and putting into practice such violence. Frameworks such as structural violence (Galtung, 1969), everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes, 1992), and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2000) have helped to clarify the nature of systemic harm, yet they frequently oversimplify the complex, long-term, and deeply ingrained injuries suffered by Muslim women in Bengal, which accumulate over years of neglect and erasure.

Feminist scholarship on Muslim women in India often focuses on community patriarchy or neoliberal development, as described by Kirmani (2011) and Sanyal (2020), but rarely examines how state secularism, healthcare systems, and citizenship laws perpetuate prolonged and enduring violence. Existing ethnographies infrequently chart the long-term accumulation of micro- and meso-level harms or represent the paradoxical nature of experiencing suffering without being perceived—a central emphasis of this thesis.

This study addresses a significant gap in research by creating a conceptual and methodological framework that considers the unnoticed, ongoing, and institutionally

perpetuated harm faced by Muslim women, which neither occurs violently nor resolves itself peacefully. This research contributes original insights to feminist political ethnography, structural violence studies, and broader understandings of minority marginalization in India by revealing how violence is both experienced and systematically misrecognized because it does not conform to conventional forms of violence.

Research Objective:

- To examine how historical, structural, and social factors shape the everyday, often invisible forms of violence experienced by Muslim women in West Bengal.
- How their intersecting identities of gender, religion, and marginality both inform and are shaped by these harms, as revealed through their own narratives.

Research Questions:

i. How does the historical framing of the "Muslim women question" shape the everyday structural violence experienced by Muslim women in West Bengal?

ii. How do Muslim women's lived experiences which reshapes the regional dynamics?

iii. How does violence persist in invisible and accumulative forms in the everyday lives of Muslim women in Bengal, and how do intersecting identities of gender, religion, and marginality shape and reinforce this violence?

iv. How can we understand and conceptualize the invisible forms of violence in Muslim women's lives, as revealed through their own narratives that expose harms beyond conventional definitions?

Hypothesis:

- Normalisation of violence among Muslim women in West Bengal.
- Muslim women are 'double-marginalised' in West Bengal.

Theoretical considerations and Conceptual framework:

Violence against women is a multifaceted issue deeply ingrained within the fabric of every society. A significant body of literature has been developing on the topic of violence against women. The complexity of marginalization and vulnerability manifests itself in a multidimensional interplay, particularly in the cases of minorities and vulnerable communities. These factors, including personal, social, economic, political, and cultural, are interconnected and can manifest as psychological abuse. These frameworks aim to understand the numerous factors that contribute to violent acts. Some studies focusing on immediate and personal factors causing violence, like domestic and gender-based violence, neglect the broader social environments and inequalities that underlie various forms of violence suffered by women.

At the core of the conventional sphere of International Relations, violence remains the fundamental source of insecurity. Historically, the concept of violence has been pivotal in understanding state and power dynamics, as noted by Thomas (2011). Galtung held in 1969 that violence cannot be defined solely by its narrow definition.

The current historical period is characterised by the growth of majoritarian politics, an increasingly polarised public debate, and a global atmosphere of securitisation. The intertwining of religious identity with citizenship rights, access to welfare, and public acceptance has become more complex in India, particularly since the late 2010s (Jaffrelot, 2021: 92–95). In this environment, Muslim women experience a double form of invisibility: being highly visible as symbols in political discourse, and invisible in the context of their everyday struggles (Khan, 2018:142–144). Feminist scholarship worldwide has cautioned against prioritizing only headline violence, while overlooking the underlying "slow" and "structural" forms that frequently support and facilitate it (Nixon, 2011:2–3; Galtung, 1969: 168–171). Even within these frameworks, there is a tendency to simplify women's experiences into either domestic abuse stories or broader structural classifications, overlooking the specific ways harm builds up over time.

It's clear that a broader understanding of violence is necessary, given the assertion that attaining peace in modern society requires more than just preventing physical harm, which is fundamentally at odds with concepts like aggression, physical confrontation,

and threats. He believes it is crucial to expand the definition of violence and cannot dismiss its importance or implications.

In India, Muslim women, especially those within Muslim communities, have experienced targeted physical violence, particularly under a majoritarian government. Concerns over escalating violence have grown to alarming levels, prompting critical examination of the rights of Muslim women within both state and community contexts. Violence against Muslim women in India is a multifaceted issue that cannot be attributed solely to their religious background, but is instead shaped by a variety of interconnected factors, such as socio-economic status, social hierarchy, regional influences, and gender disparities.

Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence is highly relevant to understanding the experiences of Muslim women in India. The concept of structural violence describes the harm, injustices, and vulnerabilities suffered by individuals or groups due to the impact of larger societal, political, economic, and legislative forces that influence their social status and restrict their access to vital resources for survival. In the context of Muslim women in India, a range of interconnected factors contribute to structural violence. Factors such as the intersection of religious and cultural norms that give priority to patriarchal values, the role of social institutions in sustaining inequality and discrimination, the socio-economic inequalities faced by Muslim women, and the societal normalisation of violence against women are involved.

In contrast to physical expressions of hostility, structural violence, as Galtung described it, is an unavoidable degradation of fundamental human needs. This refers to a form of violence that can occur when societal structures or social organisations negatively impact individuals by hindering their ability to meet their fundamental needs. Patriarchal values embedded in religious and cultural norms are a major factor in the structural violence faced by Muslim women in India. These norms frequently give precedence to male authority, and as a result, restrict the ability of women to act independently.

In addition to the government, social institutions like the family, community, and legal system also perpetuate structural violence against Muslim women. Institutions influenced by patriarchal ideologies enforce discriminatory practices and policies that

disadvantage Muslim women and perpetuate inequality, with socio-economic inequalities compounding the structural violence faced by them in India. These inequalities are evident in numerous forms, such as restricted access to education, job opportunities, healthcare facilities, and fundamental necessities.

In India, Muslim women frequently encounter obstacles when trying to access these vital services, thereby exacerbating their social exclusion and susceptibility to abuse. Despite public awareness campaigns, legislation, and advocacy efforts, the acceptance and prevalence of violence against women persist, despite a gradual rise in anti-Muslim narratives adding to the complexity. The normalization of violence fosters an environment in which Muslim women are disproportionately vulnerable to experiencing violence, necessitating an approach that goes beyond a single theoretical perspective.

The researcher has utilised a conceptual framework for examining the complexities of violence in order to gain a deeper insight into the issue, employing an inductive method that will enable a comprehensive comprehension of the structural violence faced by Muslim women in West Bengal, specifically. Women who follow Islam are often left out of conversations and relegated to the side-lines when discussing religion and the law, particularly in relation to issues where (they) are impacted. The absence of explorations into their everyday experiences results in a gap. Key concepts guiding the study following literature reviews comprise intersectionality, discrimination, and lived experience.

Limited existing research on structural violence against Muslim women in India is fragmented, thereby perpetuating the idea that Muslim women comprise a uniform group sharing a single identity and set of concerns. A comprehensive and intersectional analysis is lacking, thereby restricting our understanding of the several forms of structural violence experienced by Muslim women.

Intersectionality is a concept that acknowledges that people's experiences of discrimination and oppression result from the interaction of various social identities, like race, gender, identity, religion, class, and caste. Muslim women form a diverse group and are disproportionately subjected to multiple targeted forms of discrimination and subordination across various aspects of life.

Kimberle Crenshaw first introduced the concept of intersectionality in 1989 within the context of anti-racist, Black feminist studies of domestic abuse. The concept defined the various power axes that are present in women's experiences in society. Collins (2015) views intersectionality as an analytical strategy, enabling a fresh dynamic and diverse perspectives on social phenomena that pertain to social justice. Mohanty (1984) posits that the Western feminist approach, which is based on rejecting patriarchal norms and values and men's domination, has a reductionist undertone. Mohanty argues that this reductive nature is not functional in every social and cultural context.

Intersectionality allows feminist perspectives to consider social issues beyond the dominant cultural narrative. Given the circumstances of Muslim women, the Muslim feminist frequently alters their storytelling to depart from mainstream Western feminism, which portrays 'Muslim women' as 'weak and subordinated' and often views Islamic feminism as an 'oxymoron' (Mescoli, 2022). The concept of intersectionality allows Muslim feminist scholars to challenge prevailing narratives on Muslim women, moving beyond the narrow framework of Western feminism. It will illustrate the distinct forms of indirect, structural violence and discrimination that a Muslim woman experiences. According to Chadwick (2017), an individual's identity is formed by combining their various identities, which is why narrative research shows that a person's unique story sets them apart, making it impossible to understand individuals solely as separate categories. This method is considered the most effective way to convey the experience of belonging to numerous minority identities. The narratives of each participant are viewed as intricate, comprising numerous analytical elements tied to their unique personalities. The actors and participants collectively craft the story through their shared experiences across diverse social settings.

Religious minorities in India have been subjected on various grounds of discrimination and scrutiny. Violent incidents, social exclusion, property damage, and prejudice against minority communities are often accelerated by narratives that stereotype them as outsiders, foreigners, or threats to society (Chowdhury, 2022). One of the most alarming concern in today’s world, is the widespread discrimination, which operates across dimensions of race, gender, and other identity markers. Discrimination refers to actions or behaviours that result in unequal treatment, producing disadvantage and harm for the targeted individuals or groups. These actions are routine—though not always—driven by prejudices, understood as generalized negative assumptions about different groups (Merton, 1949; Allport, 1954; Quillian, 2006).

Social research often relies on the idea that personal narratives or lived experience assume individuals construct and create their lives through involvement in the social world and human relationships, as noted by Schwandt (2003) and Young and Collin (2004). They also help individuals develop a sense of self and confidence, as well as enabling them to perceive the social surroundings, as noted by Smith (2003). Limited research has been conducted regarding the lived experiences of Muslim women in the context of structural violence in West Bengal. The lived experience of Muslim women plays a crucial role in understanding the structural violence they encounter, which comes in many different forms. Rasheed (2022) examined the ordinary, day-to-day life experiences of Muslim women by focusing on instances of marginalization and oppression. Incorporating lived experience as a fundamental concept will allow for the identification of the unseen effects of violence and the interconnected nature of violence patterns within social systems and institutions (Montesanti, 2015).

Significance of the Study

The thesis posits that for scholarly understanding, new analytic languages are needed to identify and explain these formations of violence. Theories of violence that are rooted in structural analysis (Galtung, 1969), symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2001), or feminist views of the state have highlighted several of these dynamics, despite the limited conceptual understanding about the temporal accumulation and invisibility of certain forms of violence. The silence surrounding Muslim women in modern-day India is particularly striking, as their experiences are obscured in two ways: first, by the lack of visibility surrounding non-violent forms of gendered abuse, and second, by the erasure of communalised violence when it doesn't manifest as riots or state oppression.

Against this context, the necessity for re-examining violence is not merely theoretical—it holds significant ethical and political implications. If violence were to become invisible simply because it's no longer visible in obvious forms, we risk re-legitimizing the very systems that generate it. The historical significance of this investigation is not solely about understanding knowledge but also about who defines violence and who falls outside of these definitions.

This is where I locate the origin of Accumulative Invisible Violence (AIV), a conceptual framework that I derived inductively through ethnographic research. AIV aims to highlight the manner in which certain forms of violence acquire power

specifically through their invisibility, slow progression, and cumulative impact over time. The theory disputes the event-oriented nature of prevailing violence theories, as well as the conceptual frameworks that make certain lives insignificant and various forms of harm invisible (Butler, 2009). This research's significance is highlighted by the current socio-political context, which is marked by increasing authoritarianism, gendered Islamophobia, and the wartime acceptance of violence, all of which intensify the invisibility and continuation of these cumulative harms. This study provides a crucial perspective on AIV by examining how violence manifests in structural, symbolic, and everyday forms, as well as overt physical manifestations, which collectively diminish the autonomy and well-being of vulnerable groups.

This research combines feminist ethnographic methods with critical violence studies, resulting in a nuanced interdisciplinary approach that prioritises lived experiences and addresses existing theoretical constraints. This study ultimately makes a contribution to academic discussions and has practical consequences for policy, activism, and social justice initiatives that are focused on addressing both visible and invisible forms of violence in marginalized communities.

Scheme of the Thesis:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter outlines the research focus on violence against Muslim women in West Bengal, situating the study within the socio-political context of India. The chapter outlines the research problem, objectives, importance, and primary research questions, while setting out the conceptual basis that focuses on structural marginalisation, gendered oppression, and intersectionality as key sensitizing lens.

Chapter 2: Methodology

It sets out details of the research design, methodological approach, and data collection methods employed in the study. It explains the rationale for adopting an ethnographic approach, participant selection, fieldwork procedures, and ethical considerations. The chapter also discusses the process of data analysis and reflexivity in the research process.

Chapter 3: Understanding Violence and the ‘Muslim women’ question.

This chapter critically examines existing research on violence, discrimination, and marginalisation, with a particular focus on conceptual discussions surrounding gendered violence, structural oppression, and the unique vulnerabilities of Muslim women. This research positions itself within a wider theoretical framework and draws attention to the existing knowledge gaps in the field of religion, gender, and structural violence studies.

Chapter 4: Lived Experience and Everyday Realities of Muslim Women in Bengal

This chapter explores the ethnographic findings, concentrating on the day-to-day lived realities of Muslim women in West Bengal. It vividly captures their experiences of exclusion, microaggressions, restricted access to education and employment, and gender-based limitations within both public and private domains. The narratives bring to light the intangible, cumulative nature of violence that frequently remains unseen.

Chapter 5: Navigating the Intersectionality and Discrimination on Muslim Women

This chapter examines the ways in which various forms of marginalisation, including those based on religion, gender, class, and socio-economic status, intersect to influence the experiences of Muslim. This further critically examines the structural, institutional, and interpersonal mechanisms that allow discrimination to persist, linking personal stories to larger system-wide phenomena, offering a new conceptual framework derived organically from the field.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Policy Implications

This chapter synthesizes the research findings, reflecting on how they contribute to a deeper understanding of violence against Muslim women that is both structural and invisible. It highlights the importance of developing more complex methods in addressing systemic inequalities and gendered violence, with a focus on theory, policy, and future research directions. The concluding chapter provides actionable suggestions intended for policymakers, civil society groups, and educational establishments. These recommendations aim to improve access to education, enhance social welfare initiatives, raise awareness against discrimination based on gender and religion, and increase institutional accountability to safeguard and empower Muslim women more effectively.

CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY

As demonstrated in the preceding chapters, official reports, statistical surveys, and academic studies offer valuable insights into societal structures. On the other hand, they frequently fall short of accurately portraying the complexities of everyday life, encompassing pauses, hesitations, subtle body language, and quiet agreements that people use to interpret, navigate, and give meaning to their daily experiences. These nearly invisible moments are not insignificant; rather, they form the basis of how life is experienced, endured, and comprehended. It is especially important to take these nuances into account in research on marginalised groups, as standard data sources often conceal the intricate, interconnected, and sometimes invisible power dynamics, agency, and restrictions. These sources often overlook the pauses, hesitations, subtle gestures, and minor negotiations through which individuals interpret their daily routines. Although these moments are often imperceptible, they are not marginal—they significantly shape how life is experienced, endured, and understood.

This study employs a qualitative, inductive, and ethnographic methodology, focusing on participants' perspectives and the contexts in which these perspectives develop. The approach allowed natural patterns and categories to emerge organically from the data, rather than imposing them artificially, resulting in a detailed and grounded understanding of the phenomena under study. Through sustained field engagement, recurring patterns became apparent—some immediately visible, others only emerging after repeated observation, reflection, and discussion. This iterative process facilitated a cumulative comprehension of how everyday experiences—sometimes quiet, sometimes barely acknowledged—interact, influence, and are navigated by participants, laying the groundwork for the conceptual insights and analytical approaches presented in subsequent chapters.

The study is positioned within a feminist interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which provides a critical framework for analysing complex social phenomena entwined with cultural complexities and power relations. It adopts an ontologically relativist stance, recognizing multiple, context-dependent social realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Such a position is essential for understanding the diverse and overlapping forms of marginalization experienced by Muslim women. The study's epistemological stance

ensures transparency in knowledge production and interpretation, reflecting the reciprocal relationship between researcher and participants (Willig & Rogers, 2017; Harper, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

This positioning aligns with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, which require clear articulation of theoretical assumptions, justification of analytical methods, and situating interpretations within broader scholarly knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021b, 2023; Byrne, 2022; Clarke et al., 2015). The research is rooted in a feminist commitment to social justice, prioritizing the voices of marginalized women while critically examining dominant narratives that obscure or suppress their experiences (Harding, 1987; Naples, 2003). Reflexivity and ongoing self-awareness were central to the research process, with careful attention to how the researcher's positionality shaped data collection, interpretation, and analysis.

The study uses a multi-sited ethnographic design, which expands ethnographic inquiry beyond a single community or location and is in line with George E. Marcus (1995), in his seminal work, *Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography*. He articulates that it extends ethnography beyond a single community or locale to explore social phenomena across interconnected sites. Ethnographers, according to Marcus (1995:105), should identify and track "chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations," focusing on the interconnected flows of relationships, connections, and practices that bind various contexts together.

A multi-sited ethnography is particularly valuable for understanding phenomena such as violence and marginalization, which are not limited to a single location, but are deeply embedded in structural, cultural, and political systems that cover multiple social and geographic settings. Conducting traditional single-site ethnography may lead to an incomplete or out-of-context understanding of intricate phenomena, whereas a multi-sited approach allows the researcher to discover patterns, connections, and processes that occur across different settings. The study encompasses various districts, each boasting unique socio-economic and cultural profiles, and thereby encompasses both localised experiences and interconnected processes, yielding a multifaceted and sophisticated comprehension of how Muslim women perceive, negotiate, and counter marginalisation.

This methodological choice is also supported by contemporary scholarship that recommends multi-sited approaches in situations where social processes are relational and operate across multiple locations. Falzon (2009) and Hine (2000) underscore the importance of multi-sited ethnography in comprehending social practices that extend beyond a single community, particularly in research on inequality, migration, and power dynamics influenced by gender. Coffey (1999) also stresses the importance of multi-sited fieldwork, highlighting its ability to uncover interactions between local contexts and broader structural forces, which may be overlooked in single-site research.

In order to capture the unique characteristics of each place as well as the more general trans-local processes that influence social phenomena, I chose this design, which allows the researcher to follow the links, linkages, and flows of social practices across multiple locales.

In line with an ethnographic methodology, the research utilises an inductive research design, enabling patterns, themes, and conceptual insights to develop organically from the data. In order to ensure that the results are based on participants' lived experiences and contextual realities, the study employs prolonged observation, participation, and reflection rather than imposing pre-existing categories or assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Schwandt, 1994). Some instances were immediately apparent, but others only became clear after prolonged interaction and discussion. Using this framework to examine the lives of Muslim women enables an investigation into how structural inequalities, cultural norms, and daily strategies of negotiation intersect across various settings.

Engaging with multiple sites also strengthens reflexivity and ethical rigor. It enables the researcher to critically examine how context shapes both participant experiences and researcher interpretations, while attending to diverse perspectives and situational contingencies. The iterative movement across sites ensures that patterns of marginalization, negotiation, and resistance are not treated as isolated phenomena but are understood in relation to broader, interlinked social processes. This multi-sited perspective thus provides both analytical depth and conceptual clarity, aligning with the epistemological commitment to situated knowledge and reflexivity. Adopting a multi-sited ethnographic approach allows this study to move beyond localized snapshots of women’s experiences and to capture the complex, relational, and translocal

dimensions of marginalization and agency. It provides a robust framework for analyzing how intersecting social, cultural, and political structures shape everyday life, enabling a comprehensive, nuanced, and ethically grounded understanding of Muslim women's lived realities.

The study focuses on four purposively selected sites — namely Kolkata, Hooghly, Bankura, and Metiabruz, which were chosen for their unique socio-cultural traits, varying levels of urbanisation, and demographic information. Combined, these sites create a diverse environment that allows for the investigation of Muslim women's experiences with marginalisation, resilience, and daily coping mechanisms, providing both comparative knowledge and a detailed comprehension of the interplay between local settings and more comprehensive structural forces. The sites illustrate how local cultural practices, community dynamics, and institutional frameworks intersect with broader socio-political systems. This multi-sited design enriches the analysis by showcasing both unique site characteristics and broader patterns.

Kolkata

As the state capital, Kolkata exemplifies a microcosm of urban disparities, where a thriving economic activity coexists alongside areas of severe destitution. Marginalized groups, such as Muslim women, face structural barriers like being excluded from formal employment, having inadequate housing, and limited access to quality education. Research involved observing interactions in urban slums, government offices, and educational institutions, which underscored the complexities of urban structural violence and the tactics women use to circumvent it.

Hooghly

Located between urban and rural settings, Hooghly provides a unique opportunity for studying the intersection of different environments. Urban aspirations in this context are influenced by both rural constraints and limited infrastructure, which are also shaped by enduring patriarchal norms. Observations in the field concentrated on how younger women's goals were changing, how they faced mobility issues, and how they balanced gender-related expectations, providing a glimpse into how transitional areas facilitate opportunity and impose constraints.

Bankura

Bankura offers a rural viewpoint on marginalization, marked by geographic remoteness, inadequate amenities, and systemic disregard. A local informant facilitated access to interior villages, allowing for close observation of daily activities like water collection, healthcare access, and household chores. These practices reveal the underlying structural inequalities that affect women's daily lives and emphasize the combined effects of rural disadvantage.

Metiabruz

Metiabruz was chosen for its distinctive social, cultural, and historical importance, and its relatively low profile in academic studies. This neighbourhood, densely populated by Muslims, is characterized by a long-established artisanal and informal economy, reflecting the complex relationships between identity, economic necessity, and social isolation. Metiabruz's significant cultural history is often misunderstood and neglected, which makes it a key location for ethnographic study and provides insight into the ability of urban Muslim communities to cope with difficulties and endure.

Fieldwork was carried out in several stages, enabling repeated interaction at each location. Temporal flexibility was crucial for establishing trust, taking into account seasonal and social fluctuations, and enhancing ethnographic insight. This phased approach also allowed for ongoing reflexivity and adaptation, thereby enabling methodological decisions to address emergent findings and ethical concerns.

Data Collection Technique:

The rseearch was meticulously planned to record the intricate, site-specific, and deeply personal experiences encountered by Muslim women in different environments. In accordance with the feminist interpretivist–constructivist paradigm and multi-sited ethnographic design, the selected methods prioritize participant agency, contextual awareness, and depth, thereby facilitating the ethical prioritization of marginalized voices and the collaborative construction of meaning.

Participant Observation: Immersive Engagement with Social Realities:

Participant observation provided a fundamental approach for obtaining detailed insights

into the daily lives, social interactions, and community dynamics that influence participants' experiences. This approach diverged from detached observation by having the researcher actively interact with the participants' surroundings, striking a balance between participation and observation in order to foster trust and authenticity.

The choice to use participant observation was driven by the realisation that lived experiences, especially those involving abstruse and covert or invisible forms of violence and resilience, are frequently embedded in daily routines, casual interactions, and embodied customs that may not be fully accessible through interviews only (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Observation proved to be a crucial tool for experiencing and understanding these embodied and relational aspects, providing a contextual setting that enhances interpretive analysis. Participant observation enabled researchers to uncover unwritten rules, power dynamics, and coping mechanisms within communities, thereby exposing the complex aspects of social life that influence how individuals experience and interact with violence.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Amplifying Participant Narratives:

The selection of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences, emotions, and reflections in a dialogue-driven environment with a high degree of openness and flexibility. This method strikes a balance between maintaining thematic consistency, so all research questions are answered, and being responsive to the individual participants' distinct contexts and narratives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The semi-structured format allowed for the examination of sensitive themes linked to violence, trauma, and recovery while adjusting questions and prompts to accommodate participant comfort and cultural awareness. This allowed participants to share their perspectives on their experiences, encompassing their outlook on life, methods of coping, and ambitions, thus reflecting the interpretivist approach that prioritises the creation of meaning.

Conversations that took place informally throughout fieldwork supplemented formal interviews by capturing spontaneous and contextually relevant information and strengthening the bond of trust between the researcher and the participants. These unstructured conversations frequently highlighted aspects of experience that structured questioning was unable to access, thereby emphasizing the necessity of methodological flexibility in ethnographic research.

Ethical and Purposeful Engagement in Sampling and Recruitment:

The study employed purposeful sampling to guarantee that the participant pool exhibited a diverse array of socio-demographic characteristics pertinent to its objectives, including age, marital status, education, and geographical location. This approach prioritizes depth over breadth, aiming to generate rich, information-dense data that reflects the diversity and complexity of women's experiences (Patton, 2015). Access to participants was facilitated through local organisations, community gatekeepers, and snowball referrals, thereby enabling recruitment of otherwise marginalised or hard-to-reach individuals. The process was guided by fundamental ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, with close consideration being given to the emotional well-being of participants due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter.

In-Depth Interviews:

Eighty semi-structured interviews took place, allowing participants to express their experiences through their own spoken words. Interviews were carried out in Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu, based on the participants' preference, and dealt with topics including access to education, healthcare, and employment. A resident of Metiabruz shared her difficulties in acquiring necessary legal documents, highlighting the obstacles that contribute to marginalization.

Field Notes of Reflexive Nature:

Field notes used in a reflexive manner played a vital role in recording observations, emotions, and initial understanding. These notes recorded instances of both dissonance and clarity, providing insight into the researcher's developing comprehension of the subject area. My initial surprise at the conditions in rural Bankura led me to investigate further into the historical and systemic factors underlying these circumstances.

Key Informants:

Key informants played a crucial role in facilitating access and enhancing contextual comprehension. In Bankura, a local teacher offered insightful commentary on the community's difficulties, whereas in Hooghly, a women's group leader acquainted me with attendees who might otherwise have been reluctant to participate.

Sampling Method:

The sampling strategy was intended to capture the varied life experiences of Muslim women across four districts in West Bengal, specifically in Kolkata, Hooghly, Bankura, and Metiabruz. The objective was to choose participants who could offer perspectives on a variety of socio-economic, cultural, and geographic settings, given the study's emphasis on intersectionality and structural violence. Two key sampling methods – purposive sampling and snowball sampling – were utilised to guarantee depth and diversity in the data.

Purposive Sampling:

The study employed purposive sampling to deliberately choose participants who met certain criteria that matched the research goals. This approach ensured that the sample comprised women whose experiences were representative of the diverse intersections of marginalization, including but not limited to gender, religion, socio-economic status, and geographic location.

Selection of participants was based on the following criteria:

- Demographics include women from the Muslim community across various age ranges, from adolescents to elderly women. Women belonging to the Muslim community, spanning different age groups (from adolescents to elderly women). Geographic Representation aims to capture disparities by considering residents from urban (Kolkata and Metiabruz), peri-urban (Hooghly), and rural (Bankura) areas.

- Women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, encompassing informal workers, homemakers, and students, are represented, including those engaged in informal labour, homemakers, and students. Those who have faced systemic obstacles, including restricted access to education, healthcare, or job opportunities. Women who had encountered systemic barriers, such as limited access to education, healthcare, or employment opportunities.

This method was especially helpful in guaranteeing that the voices of frequently overlooked groups like young girls from rural villages or elderly women in urban slums were taken into account. I sought out women in rural Bankura who had faced the

combined consequences of geographic isolation and systemic neglect. In Hooghly, participants were chosen to investigate how peri-urban transitions influenced aspirations and created challenges. This type of sampling enabled me to investigate patterns of structural violence across various life stages. Interviews with adolescent girls offered a glimpse into the desires and educational hurdles encountered by younger generations, whereas conversations with older women shed light on the changes in coping strategies and resilience that have occurred across generations.

Purposive sampling was complemented by snowball sampling, which utilised participants' networks to locate further informants, especially in situations where trust and accessibility were key considerations. This technique was particularly valuable in rural and peri-urban areas, where social networks frequently play a pivotal role in community interactions. For instance, in Bankura, following an initial interview with a local teacher, she acquainted me with several families in her community who were willing to share their experiences. These introductions played a crucial role in engaging women who may have been deterred from participating because of cultural or social obstacles.

Snowball sampling also helped reduce some of the difficulties associated with obtaining access to marginalised groups, including Muslim women residing in highly patriarchal or isolated communities. I was aware of the potential biases inherent in this technique, given that participants referred by a common source frequently shared comparable socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. In an effort to overcome this limitation, I deliberately selected participants from diverse life backgrounds or perspectives within the same local area.

Sample Size and Composition

The final sample consisted of **80 participants**, with representation from all four districts. The composition of the sample was as follows:

- **Kolkata**: 20 participants, including slum residents, students, and informal workers.
- **Hooghly**: 20 participants, focusing on families navigating peri-urban challenges and women transitioning from rural to urban livelihoods.

- **Bankura**: 20 participants, primarily rural women and girls who highlighted the compounded effects of geographic isolation and economic deprivation.
- **Metiabruz**: 20 participants, including informal laborers, young women pursuing education, and elderly women reflecting on historical neglect.

This distribution ensured that the data captured both the diversity and commonalities in the lived experiences of Muslim women across urban, rural, and transitional spaces.

Rationale for Sampling Techniques:

The study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to balance specificity and breadth, including participants who could address structural violence and marginalization. Snowball sampling allowed for inclusion of hard-to-reach individuals, like women in patriarchal or remote communities. This approach aligned with the constructivist epistemology, valuing co-created knowledge. Building trust through referrals and community networks fostered a collaborative research environment, allowing participants to share their narratives.

Limitations of Sampling Strategy:

While the sampling strategy was effective in achieving the study's objectives, it was not without limitations:

1. **Homogeneity in Networks:** Snowball sampling may result in clusters of participants with similar socio-economic or cultural characteristics, which could potentially restrict the diversity of viewpoints. Efforts were made to mitigate this issue by recruiting participants from a variety of subgroups within each district.
2. **Underrepresentation of Male Perspectives:** While the study centred on Muslim women, it is often found that structural violence is influenced by wider family and community factors. The information regarding male perspectives (e.g., fathers, husbands) was obtained indirectly from some of the participants. Including male perspectives directly could offer a more complete understanding of the underlying factors at work.
3. **Limited Generalizability:** Qualitative research results, similar to most of this

field, are highly dependent on context and not meant to be universally applicable. Themes and patterns identified can also be relevant to broader discussions about intersectionality and structural violence. However, the discovered themes and patterns can contribute to more in-depth discussions about intersectionality and structural violence.

Cultural and Linguistic Awareness:

Data collection was conducted in the preferred languages of participants, primarily Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu, in the multilingual and multicultural field settings. In cases where linguistic obstacles occurred, culturally sensitive translators were employed to guarantee precision and subtlety in dialogue. This sensitivity to language was both a methodological requirement and an ethical pledge to respect participants' voices and cultural backgrounds. Cross-checking all translations helped reduce semantic distortions and maintain the integrity of the narratives.

The study included conducting interviews with participants' explicit consent and documenting their stories in handwritten notes. The transcriptions were done manually to preserve the nuances of tone, context, and cultural expressions. The transcripts and notes were thoroughly examined to guarantee their accuracy, and all identifying information was removed to protect the participants' confidentiality. Throughout the data collection process, systematic records were kept of field notes, reflexive memos, and analytic diaries to document contextual information, methodological reflections, and emerging themes.

Setting the Stage for Fieldwork and Analysis:

The data collection framework was created to enable the gathering of detailed and complex information and conform with the study's moral and philosophical principles. The research aims to uncover the complex, frequently overlooked aspects of women's everyday experiences, placing individual stories within the larger context of social, political, and cultural frameworks. This comprehensive approach provides a solid foundation for the inductive emergence of key concepts and thematic insights in subsequent data analysis.

Thematic Analysis:

Qualitative thematic analysis is a technique that systematically identifies, categorises and interprets patterns of meaning, or themes, in a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 57). The seminal works by Braun and Clarke, published in 2006 and now widely regarded as a foundational text in qualitative research, provide a comprehensive framework for conducting this type of study. Braun and Clarke (2017, 2022) distinguish between various theme analysis approaches in their later works, each grounded in distinct paradigms and epistemological perspectives. The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined in their works (2006, 2012, 2021a, 2021b, 2023).

The framework was a structured pathway, not as a rigid checklist, but rather as an ongoing, iterative, and reflexive process that allowed movement between phases to be flexible, responsive, and tailored to the specificities of my field research.

The process took place within an ethnographic context defined by sustained participant observation, fieldnotes, and in-depth interviews that were often conducted informally in everyday areas including courtyards, tea stalls, and narrow alleys. The sensitive nature of the topic made informal settings essential: they enabled participants to converse with a level of comfort and trust that a formal interview might have restricted. In these contexts, the distinction between fieldnotes and interviews often became blurred, and thematic analysis needed to be sensitive to not only what was stated but also to silences, hesitations, body language, and the surrounding social environment in which conversations occurred. Recent updates to their framework give significant importance to reflexivity - the process of critically examining one's own presumptions, stance, and impact on the research process. In this perspective, meaning-making is considered a co-constructed process that emerges from the interaction between researchers and participants, with the analyst's reflective involvement being as essential as the participants' stories (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, :5).

At its core, thematic analysis is not a closed technical process but a means of making the nuances of everyday experiences accessible to a broader audience. It does not require a single approach: one can enter through theory, through experience, or through the unexpected fragments that emerge in fieldwork (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The

method can identify similarities and differences, reveal what one may have overlooked, and prompt analyses that encompass both social and psychological aspects. In areas such as Bengal, where certain forms of violence have become so commonplace that they often go unnoticed in statistical records, this flexibility can serve as a valuable political tool. This enables not only the mapping of harm but also the shaping of policy conversations that typically occur without public input (Clarke & Braun, 2006).

The choice to conduct a reflexive thematic analysis is directly influenced by this particular context. The researcher is not portrayed as an unbiased computer. The passage cautions us to be aware of our current position in the field, as well as our hand's tendency to hover over some patterns while hesitating at others (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The approach acknowledges that the researcher's own position affects data collection, interpretation, and analysis, and it requires continuous examination of these influences (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

Reflexive thematic analysis typically commences when certain patterns in the data start to emerge. From this point, the process involves iterative engagement, oscillating between the data and analysis, until the themes emerge and are capable of withstanding critical examination (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2006).

The data-driven themes were not predetermined but rather developed over time through an iterative process of coding and analysis. According to Clarke and Braun (2006), thematic analysis was performed following a six-phase framework that enables flexibility in moving between stages as necessary.

Phase One: Familiarisation with the Data

Data familiarity developed during the initial stages of fieldwork, with ethnographic engagement and participant observation enabling preliminary impressions and analytical hunches to form on-site. After conducting fieldwork, the semi-structured interviews, which were primarily carried out in an informal manner due to the sensitive nature of the topic, were transcribed word for word. Multiple readings of the entire dataset facilitated an in-depth understanding of the material prior to commencing the formal coding process (Nowell et al., 2017: 3).

Phase Two: Generating Initial Codes

Once familiar with the data, the subsequent step was to create initial codes that captured significant and potentially significant features in relation to the research objectives (Clarke & Braun, 2006, : 88). The coding in this study was inductively driven by the participants' accounts, with theoretical knowledge of the phenomenon also being taken into account. Segments of data were assigned codes based on their analytical relevance, allowing for revisions as interpretive clarity emerged.

Phase Three: Searching for Themes

After the initial coding, the relevant codes were grouped together to create more general categories that captured the underlying patterns within the dataset (Clarke & Braun, 2006, : 89). The study's findings were shaped by the researcher's conceptual framework, developed through extended exposure to the field, as well as by the data itself. Within these overarching patterns, more specific sub-themes were identified, offering finer distinctions relevant to the research questions (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, : 88).

Phase Four: Reviewing Themes

The themes were then reviewed and refined through a two-level process. Initial coded extracts within each theme were reviewed for internal coherence to verify they presented a coherent pattern (Clarke & Braun, 2006, : 91). The entire dataset was then re-examined to determine whether the identified themes accurately depicted the overall narratives and complexities inherent in participants' lived experiences. This iterative process guaranteed analytical robustness and adherence to the data.

Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme's essence was then defined, thereby clarifying the specific aspect of the data it encompassed and its analytical importance (Clarke & Braun, 2006: 92; Nowell et al., 2017:4). The names chosen were designed to be brief yet thought-provoking, capturing the thematic essence while preserving the participants' perspectives.

Phase Six: Producing the Report

This final phase entailed integrating the thematic findings into a cohesive, convincing, and methodologically sound narrative (Clarke & Braun, 2006, : 93). The identified meanings and patterns were exemplified through selected extracts illustrating the themes. This study's ethnographic approach is reflected in the write-up, which combines observational findings with interview data to show how context, interaction, and meaning-making are interconnected.

Thematic analysis was particularly suited to this research for three interrelated reasons. First, it offered the flexibility to work inductively with data while remaining theoretically informed, aligning with the ethnographic approach adopted in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, : 5). Second, its emphasis on the researcher's reflexive role allowed for critical engagement with how my own positionality, field interactions, and interpretive choices shaped the analysis. Finally, thematic analysis allowed for the integration of multiple qualitative sources—most notably in-depth, largely informal interviews and participant observation—into a coherent interpretive framework. This was essential in addressing the sensitivity of the topic, as informal conversational settings often yielded richer, more candid accounts than formal questioning could elicit. The method's capacity to accommodate narrative complexity while foregrounding participants' lived experiences ensured that the findings remained both analytically rigorous and contextually grounded.

The thematic analysis in this study was based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria and strategies from Braun and Clarke (2021). These include maintaining reflexive journals, taking time with analysis, and seeking interpretive feedback from trusted peers and supervisors. Peer discussions were used as a sounding board for questioning assumptions, refining theme boundaries, and testing the resonance of interpretations. This collaborative reflexivity helped prevent premature closure in the analysis, ensuring themes remained grounded in the data and open to complexity. The strength of any thematic analysis is not only its interpretive depth but also the trust the reader can place in it. The study's approach encourages immersion, reflexivity, and openness to others' insights, whether from peers, mentors, or supervisors. The study's universal criteria for rigor included theoretical knowingness, depth of engagement, and reflexivity. These commitments were not mechanical boxes, but ongoing conversations with the researcher, interlocutors, and the research landscape.

The study entailed a process of negotiation between the realities encountered in the field and the interpretation of them, prioritizing credibility by adhering to the lived experiences of the participants. Understanding was layered through the use of triangulation, incorporating informal interviews, participant observation, and long-term immersion. The research focused on making findings applicable elsewhere by providing rich, detailed descriptions that captured the sensory and emotional qualities of specific healing experiences to identify both general healing principles and unique healing aspects. The contextual details were preserved while keeping confidentiality intact, thus allowing participants' voices to remain distinct. A detailed record of data, field notes, thematic maps, and codebooks ensured the auditability of the study by making analytic choices transparent and open to reflection. Integrity guided the trustworthiness of the analysis, using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis at every stage. Trustworthiness stemmed from accountability to participants, their contexts, and the ethics involved in portraying lives beyond the author's own experiences.

Insider Reflexivity and Sampling Challenges:

The study used insider positionality, which allowed participants to express their experiences more fully, but also presented challenges. The researcher had to position themselves as a learner, encouraging participants to articulate their narratives. This also led to grappling with biases that could influence data interpretation. The researcher's shock at rural conditions in Bankura led to questioning if urban upbringing created blind spots in understanding rural marginalization. To mitigate this, they engaged in reflexive journaling and sought feedback from peers and mentors. The snowball sampling method, which reached marginalized communities, introduced potential biases due to shared socio-economic backgrounds among participants. To counter this, the study sought participants from different age groups, educational levels, and family structures.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical considerations were fundamental to this study, ensuring the respect for participants' dignity and autonomy. Informed consent was obtained either verbally or in writing, contingent upon participants' literacy levels, and confidentiality was preserved through the use of pseudonyms. Cultural sensitivity informed every

interaction, from the language employed in interviews to the researcher's attire during fieldwork. This chapter delineated the research methodology, detailing the design, data collection strategies, and the reflexive thematic analysis process that underpinned this study. Drawing on the ethnographic engagement, participant observation, and in-depth—often informal—interviews, the field with sustained attentiveness to the sensitivities of the topic and the trust required to access participants' lived experiences. The six-phase framework for thematic analysis was applied, progressing from deep familiarization with the data to producing a coherent and insightful account of the findings, integrating inductive insights grounded in the field with inductive perspectives informed by theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Trustworthiness was ensured through reflexive journaling, iterative engagement with the data. Ethical principles guided every stage of the research, safeguarding human dignity, protecting participants' psychological well-being, and honoring the unique ways they articulated their experiences and perspective.

CHAPTER 3

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AND MUSLIM WOMEN'S QUESTION

What, after all, do we mean when we say "violence"? Is it a term with an obvious, universally agreed core, or is it a category that has been constructed, stretched, and contested across time and context? Rather, it takes violence itself as a necessary object of inquiry. Violence is not merely the negative backdrop to nonviolence; it is its context, its constitutive condition, and at the same time the reality nonviolent resistance seeks to resist or escape. This is why violence cannot be left unanalysed, for its meanings are not stable, and its presence is neither straightforward nor universally agreed upon.

Although "violence" often appears to have an obvious and self-evident meaning, scholars have long pointed out its ambiguity. Stanko (2003) describes how the term shifts across settings and disciplines, taking shape in relation to the concerns of those who use it. Yet, much research still proceeds as though there is a common understanding of what counts as violent, presuming that incidents or acts can be easily classified in one category or the other (Triplett et al., 2016). If this is the case, why does so much research continue to operate as though violence were self-evident, as though every observer could easily sort an act as either violent or not (Triplett, Gainey, Sun, & Cullen, 2016)? What interests are served when this complexity is flattened?

What follows from this is that the definition of violence is never neutral. When researchers and policymakers adopt certain operationalizations, they do more than classify phenomena—they participate in constructing the boundaries of what society is willing to recognize as violence. Historical examples such as the recognition of child abuse or domestic violence demonstrate how scholarly framing itself can expand the terrain of the political and force new responses. Conversely, when acts are excluded from the category of violence, they risk being normalized, tolerated, or even justified. As Triplett et al. (2016) argue, definitions that legitimize violence can themselves generate further violence.

It is in this sense that the study of violence is inseparable from the production of its meaning. To research violence is not only to describe it but to help construct the ways in which it is understood socially, politically, and academically. This insight becomes

crucial for a study like the present one, which turns attention to the less visible and accumulative forms of violence that structure everyday life, particularly in relation to the Muslim women question.

This chapter explores the historical production and shaping of violence against Muslim women in West Bengal, challenges the limitations of conventional datasets and policy reports, and establishes the stage for an inductive ethnographic approach, where the field becomes the primary site of knowledge production, rather than existing literature or statistics.

The chapter draws on secondary literature, official statistics, colonial records, and critical theoretical frameworks to provide a contextual understanding of the Muslim women question in West Bengal. It engages with sources like Census 2011, NFHS-5, and NCRB data, but treats them as situated and partial representations rather than transparent truths. The chapter maps the terrain of knowledge by juxtaposing these sources with historical perspectives and scholarly analyses.

The ethnographic journey that follows is therefore a necessary extension of a more extensive conversation—one that transitions from structural histories and suppressed statistics towards the detailed, everyday environments in which violence occurs, is contested, and is negotiated.

This chapter engages in a critical examination of the complex violences encountered by Muslim women, placing these experiences within the framework of historical, socio-political, and cultural contexts. Mainstream scholarship often relies on abstract indicators or institutionalized data to discuss minority women; however, this research aims to bring to the forefront the real-life experiences that conventional analyses tend to overlook (Sachar, 2006, : 112; Kundu, 2009, : 66). The objective is not merely to describe things, but to examine the underlying systems—both obvious and subtle—through which gender-based marginalization is maintained, accepted, and frequently becomes imperceptible.

Framing the Inquiry

The realities of Muslim women in West Bengal cannot be comprehended through a single discipline or reduced to national averages. Policy reports and census tables frequently reveal patterns at the macro level, but they can obscure the uneven

experiences that occur across different regions. In India, the female literacy rate among Muslims in 2011 was 51.9%, with West Bengal having a notably higher rate of 59.4%. The state's literacy rate was still noticeably lower than the literacy rate of Hindu women, which stood at 70.5% (Census of India, 2011).

In West Bengal, the work participation rate for Muslim women was 11.5%, which was less than half the rate for Hindu women at 23.3%, and significantly lower than the national rural female average of 25.6% (Census of India, 2011). The disparity becomes even more pronounced when employment is broken down by type: Muslim women are disproportionately represented in informal, home-based, or seasonal work, which does not provide social security or wage stability (GOI, 2014, : 72).

Table 3.1: Literacy & Work Participation – Women in West Bengal (2011 Census)

Category	**Muslim Women (%)**	**Hindu Women (%)**	**State Female Avg (%)**
Literacy Rate	59.4	70.5	67.6
Work Participation Rate	11.5	23.3	18.4

Table Source: Census of India (2011), Primary Census Abstract, West Bengal.

Although structural exclusion was revealed by these quantitative discrepancies, the texture of lived reality is not captured. The everyday conflicts, limited options, and frequent microaggressions that comprise Muslim women's social environments are outside their scope of discussion. Furthermore, they are unable to take into consideration historically entrenched types of disadvantage that are slow, cumulative, and sometimes imperceptible to official accounting—rather than sudden or dramatic.

Islam and Identity in Bengal:

The history of Islam in Bengal is closely linked with the region's political, cultural, and social changes, but it does not follow the typical linear path often described in broader Indian histories. Islam spread into Bengal through a combination of migration, trade, Sufi missionary work, and the expansion of agricultural settlements, not solely through military victories (Eaton, 1993). Bengal's deltaic geography, with its fertile but relatively unpopulated borders in the medieval period, offered both ecological and social space for Islam to take hold in ways that differed from North India. Across numerous rural regions, Islam was disseminated by incorporating local traditions and a gradual shift in community identities, resulting in a syncretic religious environment (Ahmed, 2001).

Throughout centuries, this resulted in a Muslim population in Bengal characterised by internal diversity — in language, class, and cultural practices. In the region, although Bengali is the predominant language among Muslims, notable segments, especially in districts bordering and affected by migration, communicate in Urdu, Hindi, or dialects shaped by Bihar and Assam. The existence of linguistic pluralism within Bengali Muslims complicates the idea of a unified "Bengali Muslim" identity (Chatterji, 1994). Despite these differences, shared experiences of marginalisation, particularly those related to economics and gender, have fostered a fragile yet tangible collective consciousness.

The reorganization of Bengal's politics under colonial rule had a significant impact on shaping Muslim identity. Subsequent to the Permanent Settlement of 1793, Hindu zamindars were disproportionately benefited by land-tenure policies, with a significant number of Muslim peasants being relegated to tenancy and sharecropping (Bose, 1986). This economic subordination became increasingly linked with cultural marginalisation, as colonial and nationalist discourses framed Muslims more often as being "backward" in education and modern professions (Government of India, 1901:11). The structural disadvantages carried over into the post-independence period, exacerbated by communal politics, uneven development, and targeted violence (Sachar Committee Report, 2006).

The status of Muslim women has been doubly overlooked — incorporated into the story of the "Muslim backward community" and erased within both the patriarchal structures of the community and the state (Hasan & Menon, 2005). In Bengal, women's significant but underreported labour contributions to agriculture, informal employment, and home-based industries have had profound effects due to their relative absence from official records. Official sources, including the Census of India and the National Sample Survey, offer limited insight into the scope of women's economic contributions, which in turn perpetuates the notion that they are passive and reliant. (Government of India, Census of India 1901, Bengal Report, 47).

It is also crucial to acknowledge that violence against Muslim women in Bengal cannot be solely comprehended through instances of overt communal or gender-based harm. State welfare policies do not effectively address these experiences, frequently portraying Muslim women as passive recipients of aid rather than as active agents (Kundu Committee Report, 2014).

The identity of Bengali Muslims, and the particular standing of women within it, is a dynamic concept that evolves through a complex interaction of historical, social, and religious factors. It is crucial to acknowledge and give prominence to these complexities at the outset before proceeding with the ethnographic analysis. Understanding Muslim women's lives fully requires placing them within the interconnected histories of Islam in Bengal, economic and social marginalisation, and the exclusion based on gender, which in turn enables us to appreciate why the field is the most crucial location for knowledge generation.

Historical and Political Context of Muslims in Bengal:

The presence of Muslims in Bengal has always been marked by a paradox of being both central and marginal: integral to the region's social structure, yet consistently relegated to its political and cultural peripheries. To comprehend the precarious situation of Muslim women today, it is essential to examine how the histories of partition, colonial policies, class and urban–rural divisions, and state-led enumerations have shaped Muslim identity in Bengal and more broadly in India. Partition and the burden of being a minority. The 1947 Partition divided Bengal into West Bengal (India) and East Bengal (later East Pakistan, now Bangladesh), creating a lasting crisis of belonging for

Muslims who remained in India. As Chatterji (1994) illustrates, the post-partition politics of West Bengal cast Muslims as a community perpetually under suspicion—required to demonstrate loyalty to a Hindu-majority state while simultaneously facing land loss, displacement, and systemic exclusion. Kundu (2009) further notes that the violence of partition, followed by repeated communal tensions, turned Muslims in West Bengal into a "surplus population"—viewed as politically expendable and economically marginal. This burden was tangible. In the wake of partition, the Bengali Muslim was identified as both "local" and "outsider"—a contradiction that continues to influence state policies and public discourse. The "minority" label became more than just a demographic identifier; it became a political stigma that has justified under-representation in bureaucracy, unequal access to education, and suspicion in security matters. The roots of this fragility extend back to the colonial era. British "divide and rule" strategies institutionalized communal categories through censuses, separate electorates, and legal codifications (Majumdar, 1963). Muslims were increasingly viewed through numbers—how many, in what occupations, in which districts—rather than as part of a shared polity. The colonial fixation on enumeration embedded religious differences into governance itself, laying the groundwork for what Gyanendra Pandey (1990) describes as the "politicisation of religious identities." Simultaneously, colonial Bengal saw the emergence of a Muslim political consciousness: one divided between reformist elites (ashraf, upper-caste Muslims influenced by modernist movements) and rural peasantry grappling with land alienation and poverty. While Kolkata became the center of political activity, it seldom represented the majority of Muslims who lived in rural Bengal, where identities were shaped through agrarian struggles and cultural syncretism rather than elite reformist debates.

The dynamics between classes and urban versus rural areas have resulted in significant implications for representation, particularly in the silences of representation between the urban elite and the rural majority. Ashraf Muslims in Kolkata engaged in discussions about education, social reform, and identity politics, but these discourses rarely resulted in tangible benefits for rural Muslim populations. This imbalance explains why Muslims continue to be under-represented in higher education and state employment despite their large demographic presence (Sachar Committee Report, 2006). The colonial-era divide—between elite visibility and mass invisibility—persists today, influencing how Muslim women's lives are represented (or overlooked) in both state data and feminist scholarship.

The post-independence Indian state reinforced the structural position of Muslims that had been shaped by history, as evidenced by statistics. Census data, committee findings, and policy records consistently demonstrate the Muslim community's exclusion, but the ongoing presence of this evidence has not led to significant change. The Sachar Committee (2006) revealed that Muslims in India have similar socio-economic characteristics to those of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, including low literacy rates, a lack of representation in government positions, and limited access to healthcare and education. The Ranganath Mishra Commission (2007) and the Kundu Committee (2014) reinforced these findings, specifically in West Bengal where Muslims comprise more than a quarter of the population but are disproportionately underrepresented in positions of power.

The reliance on enumeration inherently contains its own violence. This demographic is perceived as a problem that requires management and containment, with the best-case scenario being sympathy. What remains unseen are the private, ordinary processes of exclusion: the quiet refusal of housing in urban areas, the omission of Muslim women from labour statistics, the silent acceptance of police monitoring. Statistics provide a semblance of recognition while concealing actual violence that is being endured.

In this context, the historical-political background of Muslims in Bengal serves as the underlying framework in which the lives of Muslim women are situated. The Partition entrenched their status as minorities in their own homeland. Colonial policies entrenched the distinction between groups. Fractures in representation arose from class and urban–rural divides. Census data reinforced the notion of their marginal status without altering it. In this context, Muslim women's struggles are not just personal or household matters; they are deeply intertwined with a long-standing legacy of political marginalization and the dismissal of their knowledge. This chapter thus reframes the inquiry not as "Why are Muslim women marginalized?" but as "How has the marginalization of Muslim women been constructed, repeated, and rendered imperceptible over time?" Tracing this genealogy is crucial for the ethnographic chapters that follow to reveal the hidden textures of violence, which are often unrecorded in statistics and unaddressed in official statements.

The Nature of Invisibility

The kind of harm in question corresponds to Nixon's (2011) definition of slow violence—a type of violence that is incremental, accretive, and dispersed over time. For Muslim women in West Bengal, slow violence can be seen in persistent educational underachievement, restricted occupational mobility, chronic health neglect, and social isolation, which all worsen over a woman's lifetime.

Mainstream analyses often overlook these harms, focusing instead on individual incidents rather than the prolonged effects of deprivation and structural inequality that can persist over time. Comprehending these patterns necessitates consideration of the mundane, repetitive, and frequently internalized aspects of harm, encompassing the small yet cumulative ways in which systemic inequities influence life paths, restrict individual agency, and curtail well-being. Surveys on a large scale, such as NFHS-5, conducted between 2019-21, only add to the obscurity of these dynamics. Religious disaggregation often proves inconsistent or is categorised under “other” categories, despite providing valuable indicators on nutrition, fertility, and domestic violence (NFHS-5, 2021:56). According to NCRB crime data, only reported incidents are recorded, while other socially embedded harms, including restrictions on movement, community-imposed gender norms, and exclusion from local decision-making bodies, remain unrecorded in official statistics.

This erasure is an intentional act with significant political implications rather than a mere technical oversight. This leads to the suppression of particular perspectives, ultimately influencing the focus of policy decisions and public debate. What is not counted will not be prioritized, and anything that is not prioritised will continue to be underreported.

Historical Sediments of the Muslim Women Question in Bengal

The origins of this invisibility can be linked back to colonial systems of categorization. The Census of India, 1901 characterised Muslim women in Bengal as being confined by purdah and excluded from public life, with their education being minimal and their social interactions severely limited (Census of India, 1901, Vol. V, : 214). The Bengal District Gazetteer for Murshidabad (1914) also stated: "The purdah nashin women of the Mussalman community are rarely seen outside their courtyards, their situation unchanged by the spread of education among the Hindus" (O'Malley, 1914:112).

These early census narratives were not neutral descriptions; instead, they influenced both colonial policy and the developing nationalist discourse. In Bengal, the issue of Muslim women became linked with discussions on education, veiling practices, and modernity. Reformers, including both Muslim and Hindu groups, frequently portrayed Muslim women as passive recipients of reform rather than as active participants in the reform process. This framing continued after independence, although the idioms changed—from colonial "civilizing missions" to developmentalist "upliftment" programs.

In post-independence West Bengal, the issue of Muslim women's status was frequently raised in political discussions about personal law, secularism, and minority rights. The Shah Bano case of 1985 had a significant impact on the political discourse in West Bengal, despite being legally resolved in Madhya Pradesh. Discussions about these issues rarely focused on the practical and infrastructure problems faced by Muslim women in the state, including land ownership, inadequate school facilities in predominantly Muslim areas, and limited access to salaried work opportunities. Attention shifted to highly publicised cases and symbolic actions, largely ignoring persistent inequality.

This chapter serves as a methodological and analytical bridge, linking contemporary Muslim women's experiences to historical paths, institutional disregard, and socio-political exclusion, thereby laying the groundwork for the forthcoming ethnographic findings. Tracing these interwoven layers is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the full spectrum of violence, its subtleties, and its underlying structural dynamics (Kundu, 2009, : 67; Hasan, 2004:79).

Contextualising Violence and the Muslim Women Question:

Violence, as both a lived experience and an analytical category, resists a single definition, for it operates across multiple registers—physical, structural, symbolic, and epistemic (Galtung, 1969, : 171). To truly grasp the plight of Muslim women in West Bengal, one must consider the centuries of socio-political and economic marginalization that have shaped their communities. Galtung’s tripartite model of direct, structural, and cultural violence (1969) is indispensable, revealing that the absence of overt conflict does not equate to the absence of harm. Instead, systemic

inequalities perpetuate subordination through everyday structures and norms (Galtung, 1969, : 172). However, while foundational, this framework falls short in capturing the uniquely gendered and religiously inflected violence faced by Muslim women in India—violence intricately woven with gender, religious identity, caste, and class (Menon, 2004, : 88; Jeffery & Basu, 1996, : 5). Feminist scholarship crucially expands this understanding by highlighting how gender influences both the occurrence and visibility of violence (Crenshaw, 1991, : 1244; Mahmood, 2005, : 23). In India, the Muslim woman is often portrayed in reductive binaries: either as a victim of her community's patriarchal practices or as a target of state intervention (Kumar, 2012, : 57). Such simplistic framings obscure the complexity of her lived realities and systematically erase the culpability of state institutions and majority politics in exacerbating her vulnerability (Hasan, 2019, : 64; Bhatty, 2020, : 311). This chapter boldly seeks to transcend generalized definitions of violence by engaging with frameworks that are attuned to historical layering, intersectional identities, and the micro-politics of everyday life (Das, 2007, : 8). It anchors the discussion within India's contemporary socio-political landscape, where memory, media, and law converge to shape both the narratives and silences surrounding Muslim women's lives. Historically, Muslim communities in Bengal have been systematically excluded from institutional power, land ownership, and education—disadvantages that have disproportionately intensified women's vulnerabilities (Hunter, 1876, : 45–46; Chatterji, 1994, : 65). Today, Muslims make up nearly 27% of West Bengal's population, yet their literacy and workforce participation rates remain below the state average, starkly reflecting long-standing socio-economic marginalization (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011: 10–12). The Sachar Committee Report (2006) emphatically underscores how Muslim women are multiply disadvantaged, positioned at the intersections of religion, gender, and class. While government statistics and large-scale studies (Hasan, 2009) offer valuable insights, they fall short in capturing the nuances of women's everyday negotiations with violence, survival, and agency across family, community, and public domains. This gap necessitates an inductive, ethnographic approach: one that prioritizes lived experience over pre-given categories, while critically engaging archival, statistical, and feminist sources not as endpoints but as contexts against which fieldwork insights may be situated.

The "divide and rule" colonial strategy aggravated these disparities. The 1905 Partition of Bengal, presented as administrative, resulted in Muslim-majority East Bengal and Hindu-majority West Bengal, exacerbating communal divisions and increasing elite Muslim mobilization (Chatterji, : 1994:65–67). Policies enacted after this period, including the 1932 Communal Accord, solidified divisions based on religion and caste, resulting in upper-caste Muslim cooperation with the colonial government while further fragmenting the community as a whole. These manoeuvres left Muslim women doubly marginalized, excluded from both nationalist politics and emerging educational and public life spaces (Sachar Committee, 2006, : 43–47). When considered collectively, these historical paths of development account for the persistence of structural disadvantages up to the present time.

The Muslim Women Question in Scholarship

The "Muslim woman question" in India is a politically charged area of study, rather than a neutral topic, where various discourses intersect and frequently clash. It is influenced by both historical and modern discourses. According to Hasan and Menon (2004), Muslim women have traditionally been portrayed as needing reform, rescue, or regulation, without adequate acknowledgment of their autonomy or expertise. Similar to the 19th-century "woman question" discussions in Bengal (Chatterjee, 1989), it highlights the extra marginalization of Muslim women within intersecting socio-political systems.

These exclusions were amplified by colonial representations. The practice of purdah and the perceived "backwardness" of Muslim women were used to justify a system of civilizational hierarchies, by contrasting the reformist Hindu bhadramahila with the veiled Muslim woman (Lelyveld, 1990; Forbes, 1996). British policies, such as the 1905 Partition and the 1932 Communal Accord, strengthened communal and gendered hierarchies, resulting in Muslim women being largely denied access to education, institutional power, and political participation (Chatterji, 1994; Hunter, 1876).

Postcolonial feminist scholarship has unevenly examined the "woman question," frequently emphasizing Hindu women's reform and nationalist involvement while minimizing Muslim women to symbols of conservatism, backwardness, or minority susceptibility (Hasan & Menon, 2004; Jeffery & Basu, 1996). In Bengal, this selective

representation renders Muslim women doubly invisible both within feminist historiography and minority rights discourse.

Reports from various states, such as the Sachar Committee (2006), have documented significant socio-economic disparities, including low literacy rates, limited workforce engagement, and a preponderance of jobs in informal sectors. In West Bengal, the 2011 Census records that 59% of Muslim females are literate, compared to 77% of Hindu women. These statistics primarily focus on entrenched inequalities while portraying Muslim women as mere statistics, failing to account for the multifaceted nature of their experiences in family, community, and public settings.

Historical, colonial, and policy legacies combined show why structural disadvantages continue to exist. This highlights the need for ethnographic approaches that centre lived experiences and intersectional identities, moving beyond deficit-based metrics to comprehend the complex realities of Muslim women in Bengal. The framework devised by Hasan and Menon, when combined with qualitative research methods, yields crucial information about how factors such as gender, religion, social class, and social hierarchies intersect to influence these experiences.

Beyond the Deficit Model: Agency, Representation, and the Bengal Muslim Woman:

Research on Muslim women in South Asia initially portrayed them mainly as passive victims of patriarchal norms, conservative community values, and religious rules. These representations normalised their subordination and concealed the range of their actual life experiences. However, recent scholarship has challenged these monolithic narratives. Mahmood (2005) showed through her ethnography of women's piety movements in Egypt that agency doesn't have to always be expressed as open resistance: practices of devotion and submission can be powerful forms of self-expression and empowerment. Studies by Hasan (2005) and Menon (2004) also illustrate Muslim women's participation in Indian politics, education, and communal activism. Even these accounts often overlook the regional, social class, and caste-specific factors that shape the experiences of Muslim women, resulting in homogenization.

This erasure is most pronounced precisely within Bengal. Unlike the highly publicized movements in other parts of India, such as Shaheen Bagh or Kerala's educational initiatives, Muslim women in the region are rarely central figures in academic studies. Their presence in Bengal is mainly recorded in non-governmental organisation reports, microfinance research studies, or dispersed ethnographic studies (Nightingale, 2011). These accounts often portray Muslim women through programs in literacy, reproductive health, or vocational training. These initiatives, although significant, may inadvertently convert women into passive recipients, rather than acknowledging their agency as historical and political actors who operate within intricate socio-economic frameworks and assert their power despite restrictive conditions.

The symbolic representation of Muslim women has reinforced their marginalization. In Bengal's historical discourse—spanning newspapers, colonial records, and reformist writings—Muslim women have frequently been portrayed as symbols rather than as autonomous actors. The burqa, in particular, has functioned as a visual marker of cultural difference, conservatism, or backwardness, emphasizing the supposed "otherness" of Muslim communities. Such portrayals, rooted in colonial and postcolonial narratives, prioritize external interpretation over women's lived experiences, rendering their perspectives largely invisible. Non-governmental organizations, despite providing essential platforms, often reproduce this framing: literacy programs, vocational training, and microfinance initiatives frequently treat Muslim women as passive beneficiaries rather than active agents in socio-political processes. While these interventions raise awareness, they can inadvertently reinforce a deficit-oriented view, highlighting perceived shortcomings rather than addressing structural vulnerabilities, such as landlessness, caste hierarchies, and systemic exclusion. The relative visibility of Muslim women in development programs versus their marginalization in academic research underscores the uneven production of knowledge shaped by institutional and intellectual hierarchies.

These patterns of marginalization have historical roots. The socio-economic and cultural exclusion of Muslims in Bengal resulted from processes that were neither random nor isolated. Interventions by colonial powers, like the Permanent Settlement of 1793, led to Hindu bhadralok elites being established as zamindars, whereas large sections of the Muslim population, especially in eastern Bengal, were relegated to

smallholding, sharecropping, or landless labor (Sugata Bose, 1986; Kundu, 2014). The unequal distribution of agricultural resources led to long-term economic uncertainty and revamped social structures, effectively blocking Muslims' access to state institutions and local power. This structural dispossession, combined with rural-urban labor migration into jute mills, informal employment, and domestic work, led to the formation of an urban underclass whose precarious circumstances have continued across multiple generations (Chatterji, 1994).

Historically, educational exclusion has acted to reinforce inequality. Higher education, civil service positions, and professional opportunities were mainly restricted to Hindu elites during the colonial period, thereby severely limiting access for Muslims, especially women, as noted in Khan (2001). The disparities in literacy rates between Muslims and the general population in West Bengal continued after Indian independence, with Muslim literacy rates at 68%, lower than the overall literacy rate of 77%, particularly impacting women (Sachar Committee, 2006). Data from the 2019-21 NFHS-5, study indicate that Muslim girls, particularly in rural regions, continue to encounter substantial obstacles to completing their education. Restricted access to education constrains social mobility, hinders entry into stable employment, and perpetuates cycles of economic and social vulnerability.

The marginalization of Muslim women occurs at the intersection of factors including gender, religion, and socio-economic status. Women predominantly work in informal labor sectors, including beedi-making, zari work, and domestic service, frequently under unregulated, low-waged, and physically demanding conditions (Rao, 2003; Oza, 2006). Their crucial role in household food supplies often goes unrecorded in official documents, illustrating the contradictory situation of being indispensable yet invisible. Traditionally, nationalist and developmental stories have framed Muslim women as symbols of underdevelopment or statistical shortcomings, concealing the complex tactics they use to maintain their living standards, assert their autonomy, and uphold their dignity within restrictive social and economic systems (Lukose, 2009).

This empirical evidence highlights the existence of structural inequalities. The Sachar Committee (2006) found that Muslims were underrepresented in government jobs, overrepresented in informal work, and had lower household incomes compared to some Scheduled Castes. In West Bengal, 27% of the population is Muslim, yet they are

largely excluded from professional and institutional domains as stated in the Census of India (2011). The Kundu Report (2014) also brings to light educational disparities, which are evident in the fact that only 4% of Muslim youth opted for higher education, whereas 11% of the state's youth pursued this option. Structural disadvantages intersect with gender-specific constraints, such as lower educational attainment, early marriage, and limited political visibility, resulting in both material and symbolic forms of exclusion.

These historical, educational, and economic processes collectively show that the marginalization of Muslim women in Bengal is deeply ingrained rather than coincidental. Centuries of land loss and displacement have been worsened by government inaction and the deliberate concealment of information, leading to multiple layers of exposure. Analyzing the challenges facing Muslim women necessitates shifting focus away from their deficits and instead prioritizing their lived experiences, framed within historical and structural contexts that both limit and empower their agency. An intersectional perspective enables scholarship to thoroughly investigate the processes that have led to marginalization, rather than simply documenting its outcomes.

These long-standing patterns of displacement, educational inequality, and economic disadvantage go beyond abstract inequality, influencing the daily lives of Muslim women across social, political, and family contexts. Marginalization is evident not only through deprivation but also through constraints, oppression, and forms of suffering, which can be either overt or subtle, underscoring the widespread and complex nature of structural disadvantage. To gain a deeper understanding, it is necessary to move beyond analyses that focus on deficits and instead place a priority on the actual experiences of Muslim women, considering the historical and structural contexts that simultaneously limit and empower their agency. By placing emphasis on this intersectional perspective, scholarly research can critically examine the processes that have historically resulted in marginalization, rather than simply documenting its consequences.

These historical patterns of dispossession, educational exclusion, and economic marginalization create more than inequality; they also shape the everyday realities that Muslim women experience in their social, political, and family lives. Marginalization

is more than just an abstract loss; it is closely linked with experiences of restriction, oppression, and suffering, which can take on visible or less obvious forms. To fully understand the effects of these structural disadvantages, it is essential to shift from socio-economic and cultural studies to the conceptual framework of violence, which encompasses both its obvious and hidden aspects. Understanding violence in this context necessitates consideration not only of physical harm but also of systemic, symbolic, and epistemic forms of exclusion that maintain inequality and restrict personal autonomy.

Conceptualizing Violence:

Over the past half-century, the analytical vocabulary of "violence" has undergone a substantial development, shifting from narrow physical definitions to a more comprehensive framework that includes structural, cultural, and symbolic forms of harm. Johan Galtung's influential typology, established in 1969, continues to serve as a key foundation in this context. He differentiated between direct violence, which is visible and linked to specific actors, and structural violence, which is embedded in social structures that consistently disadvantage certain groups, often without clear perpetrators. He went on to expand on the concept of cultural violence, which involves legitimizing narratives, customs, and symbols that make direct and structural violence appear acceptable or even unnoticeable (Galtung, 1990).

Galtung's schema has been widely accepted in peace and conflict studies, but feminist scholars have questioned its assumption of gender-neutrality, pointing out that it does not adequately account for the gendered ways in which harm occurs. Liz Kelly's (1988) concept of a "continuum of sexual violence" redefined violence as a spectrum of coercive practices and behaviors, encompassing everything from severe physical assault to everyday harassment. Judith Butler (2004) and Cynthia Enloe (2017) have highlighted that violence against women is not only a personal issue, but also deeply connected to political systems, the militarization process, and societal attitudes towards gender. Studies by Nivedita Menon (2004) and Flavia Agnes (2012) have demonstrated how patriarchal and communal structures intersect in the South Asian context, resulting in forms of harm that fall outside conventional legal definitions yet significantly impact women's lived experiences.

Critiques of postcolonialism have complicated these frameworks further by drawing attention to the epistemic aspects of violence. Spivak's (1988) concept of epistemic violence involves the omission or suppression of subaltern voices through powerful knowledge systems, which has a significant impact comparable to physical harm. According to Talal Asad (2007), "violence" is not inherently clear but is defined, bounded, and given moral connotations within specific cultural and political systems. Studying Muslim women in India requires critical insights, given that their experiences of harm frequently go unnoticed within both state-centric security discussions and mainstream feminist movements.

Social theory perspectives have also contributed to a layered understanding of violence. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, as outlined in his work (2001), which involves the internalisation of social hierarchy legitimacy, corresponds with the way discriminatory norms function within families, educational establishments, and labour markets. In minority contexts, symbolic violence is frequently perpetuated by representational violence in the media, where the Muslim woman is often portrayed as oppressed, exotic, or threatening (Bacchetta, 2004; Hasan, 2018).

These theoretical strands converge in particularly complex ways in India. In a political landscape shaped by communalization, uneven development, and legal pluralism, various forms of violence - including direct, structural, cultural, symbolic, and epistemic violences - intersect and overlap. The Shah Bano case debates of the 1980s illustrate not only the direct harm caused to an individual but also the structural inequalities inherent in personal law, cultural narratives portraying Muslim women as requiring state protection, and the silencing of alternative voices from within the community (Agnes, 2012; Hasan, 2018).

This study suggests treating violence as a complex issue, taking into account its physical and non-physical dimensions, and how these elements interact and strengthen each other over time. A schematic representation (Table 3.2) illustrates the overlap of these dimensions, as described in the existing literature, acknowledging that everyday life often resists straightforward classification.

Table 3.2: Comparative Frameworks of Violence

Framework	Key Concept	Focus of Harm	Illustrative Example in Indian Muslim Women's Context
Galtung (1969, 1990)	Direct / Structural / Cultural Violence	Physical harm, systemic inequality, legitimizing ideologies	Riots targeting Muslim neighbourhoods; underfunded minority schools
Kelly (1988)	Continuum of Sexual Violence	Every day to extreme gendered harm	Street harassment to domestic abuse in communal settings
Spivak (1988)	Epistemic Violence	Silencing subaltern voices	Exclusion of Muslim women's narratives in policy debates
Bourdieu (2001)	Symbolic Violence	Internalized social hierarchies	Acceptance of gender-segregated education as "natural"
Butler (2004) / Enloe (2017)	Gendered Political Violence	Militarization, state policies, policing of norms	Surveillance of Muslim women activists post-2001

Source: Researcher created the comparative table

The chapter highlights the importance of looking at the cumulative and frequently undetectable processes of injury in order to analyse violence against Muslim women in West Bengal beyond isolated incidents of cruelty. Prior to analysing the historical and socio- political factors that influence Muslim women's lived reality and the conversation surrounding their rights and identities, it offers conceptual clarity.

Violence against women:

Violence against women or sexual brutality is a complex global problem recognised as the most genuine form of infringement of women's universal freedom. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted in 1993, defines "Brutality against ladies" as any demonstration of sex-based hostility that leads to, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women in public or private life. The World Health Organization (1996) characterised violence as a deliberate application of actual force against oneself, another person, or within a social setting or neighbourhood, leading either to or having a high likelihood of causing injury, death, mental harm, or hardship. Despite its impact on millions of women globally, across various socioeconomic backgrounds, violence at home remains a largely unacknowledged human rights infringement worldwide. According to the WHO (2015), it can cause a severe health issue that could deplete women's energy, weaken their physical and mental well-being, and undermine their self-confidence. In societies such as India, which are characterised as patriarchal, men hold power and dominance over women in social, political, and economic spheres, just like in many other patriarchal societies across the globe (Behl 2019). Some argue that societies which uphold male superiority and prioritise practices centred on male authority within the family are more likely to experience violence against women (Roy 2015). As observed by Dagar in 2014, that violence against women and girls was not a sign of mental illness in a few individuals, but rather a symptom of a broader societal system that allowed men to view women as their possessions and maintain control over them.

While both men and women can be victims and perpetrators of violence, the types of violence most often perpetrated against women exhibit notable differences from the types commonly directed against men. Men are more likely than women to be killed or injured in conflicts and in youth- and gang-related violence, and they are also more likely to be physically assaulted or fatally injured by a stranger on the street. Regardless of the victim's sex, men are also more likely to be the perpetrators of violence. Individuals known to the victim, frequently a family member or intimate partner, are more likely to physically assault or kill women, as reported by the WHO in 2005. A major obstacle confronting researchers globally who study violence against women is creating precise definitions of various types of violence and assessment instruments that enable accurate comparisons across different environments. Violence is an

extremely widespread and intricate phenomenon. Determining it is not a precise science but rather a matter of interpretation. Notions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, as well as what constitutes harm, are shaped by cultural influences and are continually reassessed as societal values and norms undergo change (WHO 2002).

The official United Nations definition of gender-based violence was first presented in 1993 when the General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. It defines violence against women as

> *"any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. It encompasses, but is not limited to, —physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation; physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere; trafficking in women and forced prostitution; and physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs." [United Nations General Assembly 1993, Article 2, page 3]*

The World Health Organisation has also acknowledged domestic violence against women as a public health issue, as stated in their 1996 report. The World Health Organization states that violence can be prevented and its effects diminished, much like public health initiatives successfully prevent and reduce instances of complications arising from pregnancy, workplace accidents, infectious diseases, and illnesses caused by contaminated food and water in numerous regions globally. Factors contributing to violent responses, whether they relate to attitudes and actions or broader societal, economic, political, and cultural contexts, can be altered and violence averted. The World Health Organisation defines violence against women as the intentional use of physical force or threatened power against oneself, another person, or a group/community, which either causes injury, death, or psychological harm, or has a

high likelihood of doing so. The definition extends to all forms of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, and also includes suicide and other self-destructive behaviours.

Typology of Violence Against Women:

A typology or analytical framework is necessary to disentangle the complex threads of the issue, making it easier to understand the problem itself and the action needed to address it. In 2002, the WHO conducted a thorough examination through the "World report on Violence and Health," and outlined the issue of violence on a global scale. According to a report by WHO on violence and health, published in 2002, the organization proposed a typology that groups violence into three main categories, based on the perpetrator of the violent act.

- Self-directed violence
- collective violence
- interpersonal violence

This initial categorization distinguishes between violence committed by an individual against themselves, violence inflicted by one person or a small number of individuals, and violence perpetrated by larger groups such as states, organised political groups, militia groups and terrorist organisations.

Self-directed harm involves a variety of practices by which individuals cause injury to themselves, often taking the form of self-mutilation or suicidal behaviour. This continuum is often described as a progression - from brief thoughts of self-harm to formulating plans, acquiring the necessary means, attempting acts, and in some cases, resulting in death by suicide. This continuum should not be seen as a straightforward or predetermined process. Individuals who experience suicidal thoughts often do not carry them out, whereas those who attempt suicide may not be driven by a wish to die, but by a need to convey distress, protest unbearable circumstances, or regain a feeling of control. In this context, self-directed violence is not simply a personal problem but a deeply social phenomenon, influenced by environments of exclusion, stigma, and limited autonomy that significantly affect women's lives. Unlike other forms, collective violence involves group members intentionally causing harm to others in order to gain

political, economic, or social benefits. Violence against certain groups may manifest as communal riots, caste-based atrocities, pogroms, or orchestrated campaigns of intimidation, wherein the marginalization of communities serves as the ideological justification for employing force. Collective violence has a two-fold impact on women: they are directly targeted as physical vessels for honour, shame, and communal identity, and they are also indirectly affected as the destruction of homes, livelihoods, and security weakens the social structure that supports everyday life.

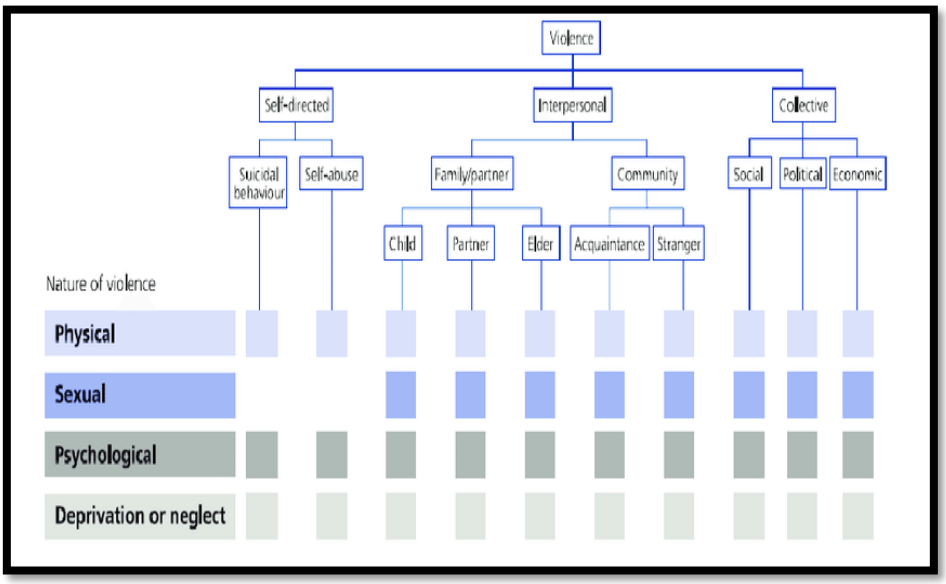

Figure 3.1: Typology of Violence against Women. Source: World Report on Violence and Health, 2002

These forms of violence, regardless of whether they are internal or external, should be viewed as integral components of larger systems of power, inequality, and social exclusion.

a) Family and intimate partner violence – that is, violence largely between family members and intimate partners, usually, though not exclusively, taking place in the home.

b) Community violence – violence between individuals who are unrelated, and who may or may not know each other, generally taking place outside the home.

The typology encompasses not just the characteristics of violent acts—such as physical, sexual, psychological, or those involving deprivation and neglect—but also the

circumstances in which they take place, the interactions between perpetrators and victims, and, in cases of collective violence, the underlying reasons that fuel them.

The data globally are indeed staggering. According to Heise et al. (1999), at least one in three women worldwide has experienced abuse, which can include physical violence such as being beaten, or being coerced into sex, often at the hands of a household member. Additionally, Heise's population report highlights the severity of this issue, noting that one in three women globally are subjected to violence and up to one in four suffer abuse during pregnancy. The World Health Organization estimates, based on 1997 data, that between 20 and 50 percent of women across various populations have experienced violence at some point in their lives. Almost two million girls aged 5–15 are trafficked into the sex trade annually, with at least 60 million girls in Asia being 'missing' due to sex-selective abortions, infanticide, or neglect (UNFPA 2000). These statistics are not simply indicative of damage; they expose the institutional undervaluing of women's lives, bodies, and prospects.

According to the WHO, a total of 48 international surveys indicate that between 10 and 69 percent of women have been physically assaulted by an intimate partner. In many legal systems, sexual violence within marriage remains largely unseen; marital rape is typically not classified as a crime in the majority of countries. This erasure is compounded by the fact that women often do not refer to forced sex within marriage as rape, which is an indicator of how deeply coercion is normalized in intimate relationships. According to surveys, 10–15 percent of women claim to have been coerced into sex by someone they were intimately involved with (Heise 1994). Research findings indicate that between 40–70 percent of women who are homicide victims are murdered by their intimate partners, highlighting the fact that violence is not limited to isolated incidents but is instead deeply ingrained and potentially deadly.

The situation in India is equally dire. Violence against women is a widespread issue that transcends social boundaries of caste, class, religion, and geographical location, and is perpetuated by cultural norms that condone and legitimise it (Bhatti 1990; Daga 1998; Miller 1999; Mitra 1999; Rao et al. 2000; Visaria 1999; Vindhya 2000). Women are susceptible not only to abuse by their husbands but also by other family members from both their birth families and their in-laws (INCLEN 2000). Labelling this merely as "prevalent" understates its significance: violence against women in India is not a minor issue but a fundamental aspect of gender relationships themselves. This reality

is systematic, intergenerational, and deeply ingrained in societal structures that exert control over women's bodies and lives.

The National Family and Health Survey-2 found that 21 percent of ever-married women in India have suffered physical mistreatment at the hands of their husbands, in-laws, or other household members since the age of 15. Approximately one in five married women have suffered domestic abuse. According to the survey, nearly one in nine women reported being physically abused within the past 12 months. According to the NFHS-2 data from 1998-99, 12% of women reported experiencing violence since the age of 15, and 19% reported being physically beaten by their husbands.

Historically unequal power dynamics between men and women have resulted in several interconnected social and cultural factors that render women particularly susceptible to the violence they experience. These unequal power dynamics are influenced by a range of factors, including socioeconomic forces, the family unit where power imbalances are reinforced, societal fears of and control over female sexuality, the notion of male superiority, and legislation and cultural norms that have historically restricted women's and children's autonomy and social standing. Women's vulnerability to violence and their difficulty in escaping a violent relationship are closely tied to a lack of economic resources. There is a cyclical relationship between violence and a lack of economic resources and dependence. On one hand, the threat and fear of violence prevent women from looking for jobs, or, at best, force them to accept low-paid, home-based exploitative labor. On the other hand, without economic independence, women have limited power to leave an abusive relationship (Schuler et al. 1996).

Defining the Muslim Women:

Research on violence against Muslim women should commence by first identifying who constitutes a Muslim woman. The violence experienced by Muslim women is frequently overlooked within the broader framework of 'violence against women'. Discussions about the discrimination faced by Muslims first started after the Sachar Committee Report was published in 2006. Only a limited number of reports and large-scale studies focusing on the discrimination faced by minority groups have emerged since then. The GOI's (2006) report revealed stark statistical evidence of the widespread discrimination faced by Muslims across various socio-economic strata. A significant

study by Hasan and Menon (2004) on Muslim women provided information on various areas, including work, health, and family. Research findings indicate that over 50 percent of Muslim women lack literacy skills, with virtually negligible higher education levels present (p. 71). Muslim women reportedly have a very low rate of work participation (14 percent), and are more likely to be self-employed, as noted on page 124. Individuals are often incentivised to take up home-based yet low-paying employment opportunities, such as tailoring or working on a piece-rate basis to assemble electronic components or toys, or sorting recyclable materials for a particular industry (Khan, 2007). Most Muslim women are mainly involved in jobs such as sewing, embroidery, zari work and chikan-kari, as well as agarbatti and beedhi rolling, all of which are often performed under poor working conditions and lacking basic amenities including toilets, childcare facilities, and social security. Engagement in self-employment among Muslim women can be attributed to the labor market's discriminatory practices, poverty, and their limited education and skills, which are a combination of factors (GOI, 2006). According to Hasan and Menon (2004, : 242), Muslim women face disadvantage and deprivation at the intersection of class, gender, and community, ultimately resulting in their subordination.

The way members of various religious groups view Muslims reveals their ability to make judgments about them. The community is identifiable by men wearing skull caps and women wearing burqa. According to Khan (2007), Muslim women are often perceived as victims of both their own male counterparts and their community. Despite numerous reports detailing the adverse socio-economic circumstances facing Muslim women, with specific emphasis on their limited education and low workforce engagement, there are a restricted number of academic studies providing qualitative research that presents alternative narratives of Muslim women. Recent shifts in scholarship have seen a shift from earlier dominant studies on topics such as triple talaq, Muslim women's rights in Islam, and their socio-economic status, to a more nuanced understanding of Muslim women's subjective experiences (Khan, 2007; Thapan et al., 2014) and their voices, agency (Jamil, 2018), faith practices (Patel-Banerjee & Robinson, 2017), work as artisans (Chambers, 2020), and entrepreneurial activities (Choudhary, 2021). Watt (2012:34) notes that the orientalist depiction of Muslim women often involves the juxtaposition of narratives about terrorism, war, and female oppression in distant lands with images of quiet, unidentified women who are

frequently unrelated to the subject matter at hand (Jiwani 2005; Falah 2005; Kassam 2008). These portrayals explicitly contribute to the silencing of the subject when they do not name the women or provide any information about them. Not only are these representations used mainly to attract the viewer's attention, thereby exploiting women and their bodies, but they also oversimplify women's experiences, for instance, images of women from one part of the world are often paired with a story from another (Watt 2012:34). Ignoring the unique experiences, diversity, perspectives and characteristics of these women perpetuates the loss of their individual identities. A narrative featuring the Muslim woman is employed to perpetuate a story that reinforces essentialist views about Islam, Muslim women, and the orientalist subject, largely to serve the sociopolitical interests of those who construct it (Abu-Lughod 2013; La Fornara 2018).

Following the 9/11 attacks, a gendered interpretation of the clash of civilizations concept has become more prevalent in mainstream Western media and film, portraying Muslim women in a specific way within the "anti-terrorism" narrative, by depicting female bodies as subordinate to men within their communities (Maira 2009:632). Images of Muslim women in the hijab, burka, or abaya have been used in media portrayals to depict them as being oppressed by their husbands, sons, and the patriarchal elements of the Muslim society (Falah 2005; Kassam 2008; Al-Fartousi and Mogadime 2012). These images are often paired with narratives that highlight the west's duty to free these women, as it simultaneously combats terrorism abroad. According to Abu-Lughod (2013), these narratives have been consistently featured in news, films, and television shows, allowing the United States government to gain public backing for military programmes in the Middle East since 2001. Visual representations of Muslims are based on racialised perceptions of them as threatening, or Muslim women as oppressed by Muslim men, contributing to the creation of this cultural front (Kassam 2008).

The emphasis on the hijab/veil serves as one means of maintaining these understandings. According to Ahmed (1992:152),

> "*Veiling – to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies – became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became*

the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies."

For centuries, Muslim women have been spoken for, judged, and misrepresented - first by colonial authorities, next by postcolonial governments, and consistently by influential social and academic circles. In the visual culture of 18th- and 19th-century orientalism, the hijab or veil was often depicted as a symbol of exoticised and alien female identity (Said, 1979). Following the 9/11 attacks, orientalist imagery reinterpreted the veil as a means of enforcing both religious and patriarchal oppression, imposed on Muslim women by Muslim men (Ahmed, 2005). Al-Fartousi and Mogadime (2012) point out that while Muslim dress signifies modesty and secrecy within Islamic settings, Western societies often view it as a sign of fundamentalism and extremism. Portrayals of Muslim women, frequently backed by cherry-picked narratives and research, have repeatedly focused on the most disturbing situations, thereby perpetuating a one-dimensional image of 'the Muslim woman'—instantly recognisable as veiled or wearing an abaya, in need of rescue (Falah, 2005; Hasan, 2012; Medina, 2014).

According to Huntington's (1993) framework of a "clash of civilizations," Islam and Muslims were portrayed as inflexible Others in need of Western cultural and educational influence. The Muslim woman was portrayed as the epitome of stagnation within Islamic society, with her liberation serving as a symbol for broader societal progress (Bullock, 2003; Kahf, 1999; Ahmed, 1992). Recent discussions in the West about "Islamism" and public displays of Muslim identity, particularly among young women, have heightened mistrust. In the UK, young British Muslim women have become central figures of media and public attention, with the resurgence of the hijab viewed as a form of cultural separatism (Dwyer & Shah, 2009). At the same time, patriarchal customs within Muslim communities perpetuate these stereotypes by limiting women's social and personal freedoms.

Historically, women's identities have been defined primarily by their perceived "Muslimness," often disregarding their individual autonomy and diversity. Men from colonial backgrounds often exoticized and eroticized Muslim women who were out of their reach, as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu noted in 1716–1717. Patriarchal customs instilled male honour within women's bodies, limiting them to wearing the chador and

domestic areas (Lewis, 1998). Early feminists and modernists portrayed Muslim women as helpless individuals requiring rescue, thus perpetuating the stereotype of the "damsel in distress" across orientalist, colonial, feminist, and patriarchal accounts (Bullock, 2003; Kahf, 1999; Lewis, 1996; Ahmed, 1992; Said, 1978). Muslim women were often viewed as either being brutally suppressed or shockingly licentious (Lewis, 1996), acting as quiet ambassadors for their faith and culture.

The primary objective of this research is to amplify rather than dilute or trivialise the intricacies of Muslim women's lives, instead giving prominence to their perspectives and real-life experiences. Instead of demystifying Muslim women's experiences from an external perspective, it facilitates a collaborative investigation that highlights their viewpoints to gain insight into the diverse nature of their lives.

Research on socio-political issues highlights the structural inequalities that individuals encounter. Women from Muslim communities tend to have lower levels of education and are underrepresented in the workforce relative to women from other groups, thereby restricting their involvement in public activities. According to the World Economic Forum (2005), countries with a Muslim-majority population experience the lowest levels of women's empowerment, offering limited access to economic, political, and educational opportunities. The Sachar Report (2006) highlights the disparities in India by documenting lower literacy rates among Muslim women, which impact careers, health, and life prospects. Islam includes principles that promote freedom, but different interpretations of its theology have shaped access to rights throughout history, making it difficult to define a universal concept of a "Muslim woman." Various socio-cultural, ethnic, and personal factors intersect with religious identity, challenging simplistic, universal explanations.

This diversity and interpretive agency are demonstrated by scholarship from Muslim women. According to Barazangi (2004), the Qur'an is interpreted pedagogically to furnish women with frameworks for self-identity and religious authority. Feminist scholars Amina Wadud (1992) and Asma Barlas (2002) have provided alternative readings that reclaim interpretive authority within Islam. A convert and scholar, Ayesha Bewley (1999), documents historical female scholarship, political engagement, and spiritual leadership, and advocates for going beyond discussions centred on the hijab that limit women's roles to a single symbol. According to Leila Ahmed (1992), the hijab

was portrayed by imperialist ideologies as an impediment to progress, a notion that was adopted and challenged by Muslim elites. Fatima Mernissi and Zainab Ghazzali, two activists, exemplify the diverse ways in which feminists become involved—from working within Western frameworks to advocating for women's rights within Islamic contexts (Ahmed, 1992; Cooke, 2001). In doing so, they demonstrate that promoting activism and gender equality does not necessitate rejecting one's faith, but rather reflects thoughtful and adaptable approaches.

These challenges are compounded by patriarchy, discrimination, and state neglect. Hierarchies within the home, where mothers-in-law or extended family members wield control, demonstrate that patriarchal violence is an integral part of a broader system, rather than being solely driven by men (Kabeer, 2005; Sangari, 2008). At the societal level, Muslims are frequently subjected to vilification and stereotyping, often viewed as a uniform "other" (Ad-Dab'bagh, 2017; Hollander, 2010; Sadek, 2017). Government reports, spanning from the Hunter Commission (1871–72) to the Gopal Singh Committee (1983) and the Sachar Committee (2006), have historically focused on quantifying Muslims while overlooking the complex issues affecting women. These individuals remain visible in the data but are essentially invisible as full-fledged social beings.

Historical records, policy reports, and socio-economic data all suggest that the experiences of Muslim women cannot be fully understood using statistics or high-level indicators. These documents outline structural inequality—literacy gaps, employment disparities, educational deficits—but they fail to address the daily compromises, sacrifices, and tactics that bring these statistics to life. Life's texture is shaped by unseen realities like a girl quitting school to work in a zari unit, a woman being overlooked for job opportunities despite her qualifications, or a family struggling to make ends meet in a precarious situation.

Omissions in census tables, committee reports, and national surveys are due to the inherent limitations of large-scale state knowledge. This data is crucial for discovering patterns, but it cannot express the decline in dignity, the burden of being overlooked, or the small but ongoing acts of self-determination that shape daily life. At this point, ethnography becomes essential. It does not replace these documents, but instead provides additional insights, highlighting the subtle, hidden, and relational aspects - the lived experiences that these numbers represent.

From this perspective, questions arise naturally, not as a list of polite queries, but as challenges that demand attention, including how Muslim women in West Bengal contend with state disregard, communal distrust, and socio-economic marginalisation. What role do the legacies of partition, marginalization, and gendered silencing play in shaping, limiting, and challenging the identities of these individuals? In situations where institutional acceptance is inconsistent or non-existent, how do they exert control, form a sense of connection, and endure, not as helpless recipients but as proactive drivers of their own life experiences.

The historical-material context constitutes the underlying landscape. Entrenched hierarchies, socio-political structures, and colonial legacies significantly influence the potential for life and survival. Despite these limitations, Muslim women establish areas for negotiation, resistance, and resilience. Through ethnography, we are able to observe these dynamics—to see not only the boundaries that exist, but also where the light penetrates the obstacles, where agency, ingenuity, and persistence come to the forefront.

This approach combines historical understanding, policy analysis, and socio-economic data with field research, fostering a dialogue between underlying structural factors and everyday life experiences. The ethnographic chapters that follow are not simply descriptive narratives; they are interventions into the politics of knowledge, challenging one-dimensional, deficit-focused representations of Muslim women, and restoring their voice, presence, and complexity.

This study aims to give a voice to Muslim women in their own words, showcasing both the difficulties they face and the methods by which they establish their influence, negotiate power dynamics, and define the future. Where official accounts trail off in abstraction, ethnography captures the essence of daily life, the continued presence of resilience, and the understated exercise of personal autonomy—the illumination that arises in settings frequently reduced to nothingness.

The crucial challenge is to question rather than assume the concept of "violence". Why are some harms recognized while others remain invisible? How do popular, political, and scholarly framings of violence construct moral hierarchies of suffering, distinguishing the “urgent” from the “ignorable”? And what interests are served when

violence is imagined as the spectacular act of a deviant perpetrator, rather than as a condition that may permeate the ordinary and the everyday?

These questions remain central for this thesis. By engaging critically with how violence has been defined, deployed, and contested, this chapter has laid the groundwork for rethinking the category itself. What follows is not a search for a final definition but an inquiry into the stakes of definition: how violence is conceptualized, who has the authority to name it, and what becomes visible — or remains obscured — in that process. This chapter has traced the historical and political context of Muslims in Bengal and India, unpacked patterns of socio-economic marginalization, and critically engaged with key governmental reports. It has shown how institutional knowledge frames Muslims as "backward," while simultaneously rendering Muslim women statistical shadows rather than active narrators.

By placing archival histories, census data, and policy reports in dialogue with conceptual lenses from feminist and postcolonial thought, the chapter demonstrates the necessity of moving beyond state-centric accounts. What emerges is a powerful contradiction: structural disadvantage is abundantly documented, yet lived experience remains largely invisible. The forthcoming ethnographic chapters will focus on capturing the everyday experiences of violence, silence, and resilience, rather than merely replicating existing data, as numbers alone cannot convey these forms. The thesis maintains that inductive fieldwork holds both methodological significance and political importance during this transition. It is precisely at this juncture that the empirical field becomes indispensable. The abstractions of scholarly debate acquire flesh and urgency in everyday encounters — in the way women narrate their lives, negotiate structures of power, and locate themselves within shifting definitions of violence. Everyday experiences bring the concepts of academic discussions to life and make them more pressing - in the way women tell their life stories, deal with the structures of power, and find their place within changing definitions of violence. The field is not merely where theory is applied, but rather where the complexities that have been discussed manifest in everyday experience. The following chapter delves into this area, demonstrating how the contested interpretations of violence manifest in the experiences and testimonies of Muslim women themselves.

CHAPTER 4

LIVED EXPERIENCE AND EVERYDAY REALITIES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN WEST BENGAL

Society, as we human perceive is interwoven in two sides apparently. One which shows the development, positive aspects of society, empowerment, peace. On the contrary, it is marred with horrific constellations of despair, loss, wars. Though, the research did not encounter violence through abstract theories or government reports. It was obvious, in the textures of everyday life, in the quiet, almost imperceptible moments where possibility was denied and agency constrained. This violence is neither sudden nor spectacular. It creeps into ordinary routines, stealthily eroding dignity, choice, and selfhood. Its harm is cumulative, invisible to most, yet profoundly shaping lives across generations. And so, one must ask: have we been looking for violence in the wrong places—on battlefields, in riots?

On 20th November 2018, what started as a typical evening turned into a pivotal moment that altered my perception of violence. Bano, a fifteen-year-old girl from my neighborhood, sat by her window, tears silently streaming down her face. Earlier that day, she had swapped pens and notebooks with her friends, shared laughter over jokes, and looked forward to the classes and conversations the next day her friends would bring. By evening, all of that had disappeared. On her way home from tuition, Bano was harassed on the street. This seemingly minor incident triggered her parents' decision: she would no longer attend school. There was no discussion, no negotiation, no chance to plead—just an abrupt end to her education, her friendships, and her budding dreams. The ordinary flow of her life had crumbled into quiet despair. From a few houses away, I was feeling helpless yet keenly aware of the moment's urgency. The silence that reflected her sobs spoke more loudly than any news headline: it was the voice of denial, the weight of everyday violence applied invisibly. In that moment, the questions that had been long pondered—about visibility, recognition, and the hidden centers of violence—became painfully tangible. Bano's life, like countless others, was limited not by dramatic events but by the accumulation of small, systemic denials. Her education, her friendships, her future—all possibilities—had been quietly, irreversibly restricted.

As a researcher understanding the vast arena of violence, I was not an observer; instead experienced it firsthand as a neighbour, coexisting yet having a distinct presence. In that moment, the total effect of daily shutdowns—the unexpressed, underlying rejections shaping the lives of Muslim girls—became unmistakably tangible. The sense of powerlessness, later experienced, along with the pressing need to recognise what had been hidden for so long, lingered with me. How many other closures, end to dreams could be happening just out of sight in my own neighborhood?

In everyday social environments, it is simple to engage in discussions about cricket, politics, or local rumours, yet the deep-seated crises of negligible educational opportunities, enforced obedience, and stifled aspirations are often met with indifference. They are often dismissed as unavoidable, attributed to 'society' or 'policy', and quietly overlooked. For those experiencing them, these are not abstract concepts - they are lived realities, shaping every movement, every choice, every inhalation.

Galtung's conceptualization of structural violence highlights that the absence of physical assault on individuals or communities does not preclude harm. Veena Das's work illustrates how ordinary and everyday settings can become conduits for violence, as rituals, routines, and care environments subtly inflict harm. Fieldwork conducted in West Bengal builds upon existing insights, not as a preconceived concept, but as a sensitizing concept, highlighting a pervasive and largely invisible violence that is both undergone and mediated.

The violence, as this chapter document is subtle yet continuous. The accumulation restricts autonomy, undermines dignity, and limits life choices. It requires more than statistics or theoretical understanding to comprehend it; an ethnographic awareness of the textures of everyday life is needed—the silences, pauses, and small breaks through which power and exclusion are exercised and felt daily. The scope and severity of structural violence are most apparent in these moments.

Similarly, in mid-January 2019. Winter in rural Bengal has a softness unlike the northern chill; mornings are slow, wrapped in fog that lifts reluctantly from the forest. By mid-morning the air warms, carrying the faint smell of woodsmoke, fried onions, and damp earth. That day, sitting on the veranda of Teesta's home, the kind of modest

two-room house with a courtyard that blurs the line between public and private. Children darted in and out, their laughter spilling into our conversation, while a goat nosed at the corner of a discarded plastic bag. She sat opposite me, her ***aanchol*** slipping every now and then, which she adjusted with a practiced ease. She had a way of speaking that moved between lightness and gravity—half confiding, half teaching. Her first words, delivered firmly, caught me:

"Ekhane bhaloi achi, bhai er moton thake shobai. Nirapod!" she said. "Here it is good. Here people live like brothers. Here, it is safe."

Her tone was assured, as though she was willing herself into this safety. She gestured vaguely toward the houses around us, where Hindu and Muslim families had lived for generations. She spoke of shared meals during weddings, of borrowing salt and sugar from neighbours, of village festivals where distinctions seemed to blur.

But then her gaze faltered. She looked beyond the courtyard wall, as if speaking to an invisible audience outside the village. A pause settled in, heavy. When she finally continued, her voice dropped lower:

"Oikhane… nirapod noy. There, it is not safe."

Upon enquiring her what she meant. She did not answer directly, but her fragments of stories filled the silence: WhatsApp videos showing Muslims being lynched in some distant state; TV anchors' feverish voices about the society; accounts of women raped and mutilated, their suffering replayed on news tickers until it felt unrelenting. "What kind of country is this becoming?" she asked, not so much to me as to herself.

Teesta's here and there were not abstractions. "Here" was this neighbourhood—a network of kinship and familiarity that allowed her to feel anchored. "There" was both the India, she glimpsed on screens and the precarious future that hovered on the horizon. Her own safety, she implied, was fragile; the knowledge of violence elsewhere seeped into her very sense of belonging at home.

As she spoke, it was realised this double vision was not hers alone. Repeatedly, other women, the researcher encountered Bengal spoke in this comparative rhythm: *here we live like kin, but there the world falls apart.* Their words folded the national into the

local, refusing to see themselves as cut off from what was happening elsewhere. Even in moments of everyday intimacy—sharing tea, complaining about rising onion prices—the spectre of larger violence threaded through their conversations.

The researcher frequently revisited a singular authorial aim while shaping this work: to write in a manner that honors these women's voices—not as passive witnesses of violence, but as active thinkers of their own condition. Their words embodied both resilience and fragility, and a profound responsibility to portray their lives with honesty and care. This commitment is inspired by other women scholars who have dared to produce deeply textured accounts of South Asian women's lives. Their works remind me that ethnography is not only an act of representation but also of tribute.

On that day, as Teesta's words lingered between "here" and "there,". The realization that the central task was not to merge these spaces into a singular narrative, but to hold them both—to write the village as it imagined itself and to write the wider nation as it seeped into the cracks of local life. This delicate balancing act is what makes the lives of Muslim women both profoundly ordinary and intensely political, both rooted in intimate relations and stretched across the violence of the world beyond.

This chapter enquires these every day, lived experience encounters and moves toward a deeper exploration of how Muslim women in selected districts of West Bengal live through and negotiate, what the researcher later call Accumulative Invisible Violence. It does not employ reductionist approach to understand violence as a singular event, but as an unfolding presence—rendered invisible by repetition and normalization, yet persistently inscribed into the fabric of daily life. They are narrated, remembered, and reimagined through what Smith (2003) calls "stories of peoplehood"—narratives that enable individuals and communities to make sense of who they are and how they belong. Such stories may affirm dominant cultural scripts or contest them, but in either case, they provide a language through which lives acquire meaning. It emphasizes participant-led communication forms—narratives, conversations, stories, and shared experiences—to explore how Muslim women in West Bengal construct their identities amidst structural constraints and everyday negotiations.

This is why the research employed lived experience as both a framework and a method of interpretation. Lived experience is not an abstract category; it is rooted in the

material, cultural, and social textures that constitute daily life. It enables us to understand how actions, choices, and identities are simultaneously shaped by broader structures and capable of reshaping them. For the Muslim women in this study, lived experiences of faith, community, and everyday practice are inextricably linked to their encounters with structural discrimination—whether in educational institutions, workplaces, or local neighborhoods.

Central to this chapter are the narratives of everyday religion—instances where faith is interwoven with the ordinary, the fragile, and the deeply human. A lived religion perspective allows me to observe that women's engagement with Islam is dynamic and multifaceted; it evolves with social expectations, institutional pressures, and the immediacy of local interactions. In my fieldwork, Islam does not manifest as a distant identity label but as a vital force that shapes women's negotiations of power, belonging, and survival.

Situating oneself in the larger context of these fields, the research presents a series of ethnographic vignettes based on conversations, observations, and interactions with women from the chosen districts. Each vignette is set within the larger context of religion, community, and gendered power structures. The narratives show how faith can be a source of strength and self-definition, even when dealing with widespread suppression. This chapter demonstrates the localized yet interconnected nature of these experiences by analysing these narratives through a district-wise approach, highlighting both shared struggles and contextual differences in urban and rural settings, and together they illuminate how Muslim women live through, respond to, and reinterpret the invisible forces of violence.

For Muslim women in Bengal, faith permeates the rhythm of daily life: not only in prayer or ritual but in gestures of resilience, acts of moral reasoning, and the quiet solidarity of community ties. As Orsi (2003: 172) articulates, religion unfolds in the "messiness of everyday life," where the sacred and the secular constantly intersect. It is within this complexity that the research investigates how Islam becomes a part through which women navigate constraints such as limited educational opportunities, restrictions on mobility, or the judgments of kin and community, while simultaneously finding avenues for endurance and possibility. Here, religion is not peripheral; it is the medium through which violence, vulnerability, and agency are rendered visible.

The stories of Bano and Teesta are but two among many. As the research delved deeper into the field, it was encountered with numerous accounts that, while distinct in detail, echoed similar patterns of silencing, resilience, and negotiation. These were not extraordinary stories but ordinary ones—integrated into the daily rhythms of Muslim women's lives in Bengal. It was through the repetition of such narratives that a collective picture began to emerge: illustrating how structural forces impinge upon women's choices, and how women, in turn, find ways to endure, adapt, or resist.

Highlighting these stories is not just a matter of research approach but also a moral consideration. Ethnography derives its power, as Das (1995: 14) notes, from immersing itself in people's words, body language, and moments of silence. Voice is crucial in the sense that it allows individuals to be acknowledged as pertinent within the allocation of speaking opportunities. As Couldry (2010: 3), explains that voice should not be viewed solely as a verbal action, but rather as a means of validation that confers legitimacy on the speaker. It sets the groundwork for intervention, which can allow both the speaker and the community they represent to contest and avoid situations of invisibility.

By understanding their lives, we can gain insight into how women interpret their situations, how they describe the challenges they face, and how they create significance despite ongoing exclusion. This chapter commences with women's voices, thereby countering the reduction of them to abstract categories or statistical entities; instead, it views their narratives as distinct analytical locations in their own right.

Stories, as Smith (2003) contends, are inherently non-neutral. These serve as reflections of community norms, but also as instruments for critique, subtle resistance, and occasionally even survival. Listening carefully to these stories entails paying attention not only to what is spoken, but also to the unspoken elements – the pauses, hesitations, and silences that convey significant meaning.

The Field: Spaces as Living Actors

Every incident, at first glance seemingly unrelated, exposed a more profound underlying pattern: education was not a fundamental entitlement, but a privilege given out and taken away at random. Though the entry in the field was not a straightforward act, it was met with distrust initially. Women frequently inquired whether the researcher was representing the government or a non-governmental organisation, echoing

centuries of extractive surveys and interventions. Men occasionally interjected, asking why the interaction with women individually occured. Access to these moments was contested and shaped by both gendered and communal forms of surveillance. As time passed, mistrust gradually gave way to small signs of acknowledgement: a cup of tea, a smile at my attempts to use local expressions, or a question asked back in genuine curiosity. Invitations to stay for meals indicated a fragile transition from an outsider status to that of a guest. Instant trust was not forthcoming; it was established over time through patience, attentiveness, and ongoing presence.

As trust increased, deeper access was gained, and ethnography began to take shape. Discussions shifted from small talk to in-depth descriptions of everyday life, including managing household responsibilities alongside paid employment, navigating transportation options, or ensuring daughters continued their education despite societal and economic challenges. These accounts exposed the underlying violence inherent in everyday life, including long walks for water, hesitating to respond to a husband, and negotiating wages with employers who provided little respect. Ethnography in this context is jointly produced in a delicate environment of mistrust and confidence.

Having carried the weight of Bano's silence and Teesta's splintered words in 2018, it was prominent, that what had unfolded before me, was not an isolated incident but a threshold into the larger cartographies of violence and endurance. Similar patterns were repeated in other locations. These observations called for a re-evaluation of violence in its entirety. It is not limited to dramatic or instantaneous instances; it can be deeply ingrained, cumulative, and embedded in the daily routines of life. Their stories compelled me to revisit—not merely as a listener to individual suffering, but as a researcher determined to trace how such experiences were embedded in the everyday lives of Muslim women across West Bengal.

My fieldwork spanned a constellation of sites: the drought-prone lands of Bankura, the riverine villages of Hooghly, the congested lanes of Metiabruz, and the sprawling, uneven cityscape of Kolkata. Each site carries its own histories of migration and marginalisation, and its own ways of inhabiting Muslimness in contemporary Bengal. Together, they hold the many lives and stories explored in this thesis.

Yet this pursuit met an unforeseen interruption by the Covid-19 pandemic. From early 2020 until March 2021, my fieldwork was suspended as lockdowns severed access to homes, villages, and community spaces. This rupture became part of the ethnography itself: women were now experiencing deeper layer of vulnerability, where health crises, economic disruptions, and isolation compounded the violence had already begun.

When I returned to the field in 2021, there was a noticeable shift in the tenor of conversations. Women spoke not only of the enduring pressures of poverty, gendered restrictions, and discrimination, but also of how the pandemic quietly reshaped the contours of their daily lives. Social networks shifted imperceptibly, trust and authority were renegotiated in the course of routine interactions, and the old inequalities deepened even as new vulnerabilities emerged. In the stories they shared, traced both the subtle recalibrations of communal life and the tangible effects these shifts had on women's choices, movements, and sense of security. The ethnography therefore unfolded in two temporal cadences—*before* and *after* Covid-19—each shaping the texture of lives.

Intersections of Voice, Trust, and Authority:

Investigating violence involved traversing complex social landscapes where authority was both widespread and firmly established. In rural Bankura and semi-urban Hooghly, hierarchies were not overtly stated as prohibitions; instead, they developed subtly, influencing how women could express themselves, move, and envision alternatives to their situations. Both formal and informal patriarchal structures shaped women's narratives, determining not only what could be communicated but also the manner in which it was conveyed.

These dynamics intersected with my positionality as a female researcher. Shared gender sometimes fostered intimacy, enabling participants to discuss their domestic difficulties, physical experiences, and family dynamics spanning multiple generations. My education, mobility, and insider status led me to be identified with the men who had power over women at other times

Reflexivity became essential, not as a ritualized method but as a principle of attentiveness to the intricate power dynamics influencing each interaction. It was primarily concerned with recognising disparities in power, social class, faith, and

research influence rather than addressing bias, and also with being aware of how power is expressed subtly through silence, nonverbal cues, and common social expectations.

Women's testimonies took the form of nuanced narratives, full of contradictions, as well as endurance and resilience, which transcended what any statistic or report could express. These narratives unfolded across various geographical settings: from congested city streets to open countryside areas. Each setting showed different ways in which Muslim women coped with constraints, visibility, and agency, yet also suggested a shared theme: the persistent nature of structural violence.

From the onset of this ethnographic journey, the question that carried was simultaneously personal and analytically objective, “What it is like to be a Muslim woman?”. In January 2019, boarding a bus headed for Bankura, reminded a district where the red laterite dust is a living testament of centuries rich history, migration, and marginalization. Women in simple cotton saris moved with quiet determination, their heads balanced with bundles of firewood as if each step weighed heavily with the responsibilities of everyday life. Men congregated at tea stalls, their discussions centered on work, salaries, and local gossip, with dust and smoke enveloping the entire atmosphere. Here, it's evident that women's stories existed behind the veil; unfolded in the small actions, daily habits, and often overlooked practices that allowed them to cope with structural barriers and seek out opportunities.

All the details—the worn expressions, the tempo of daily tasks, and the burden carried both physically and socially—suggested that underlying societal factors were influencing the lives of the people long before my presence. Here, in these streets and homes, the insidious, cumulative aggressions of everyday existence were exposed, marking the start of the ethnographic journey**.** This was not just the beginning of my fieldwork but my initiation into the intricacies of life that would, over the years, shape my understanding of Muslim women’s everyday worlds in Bengal. Each site carried its own layered histories of migration, marginalisation, and social negotiation, as well as distinct ways of enacting Muslimness in contemporary Bengal. Together, these locales contained the myriad lives, voices, and experiences that this thesis seeks to render and analyse.

Figure 4.1: A home at Chingani village, Bankura (2022, December).

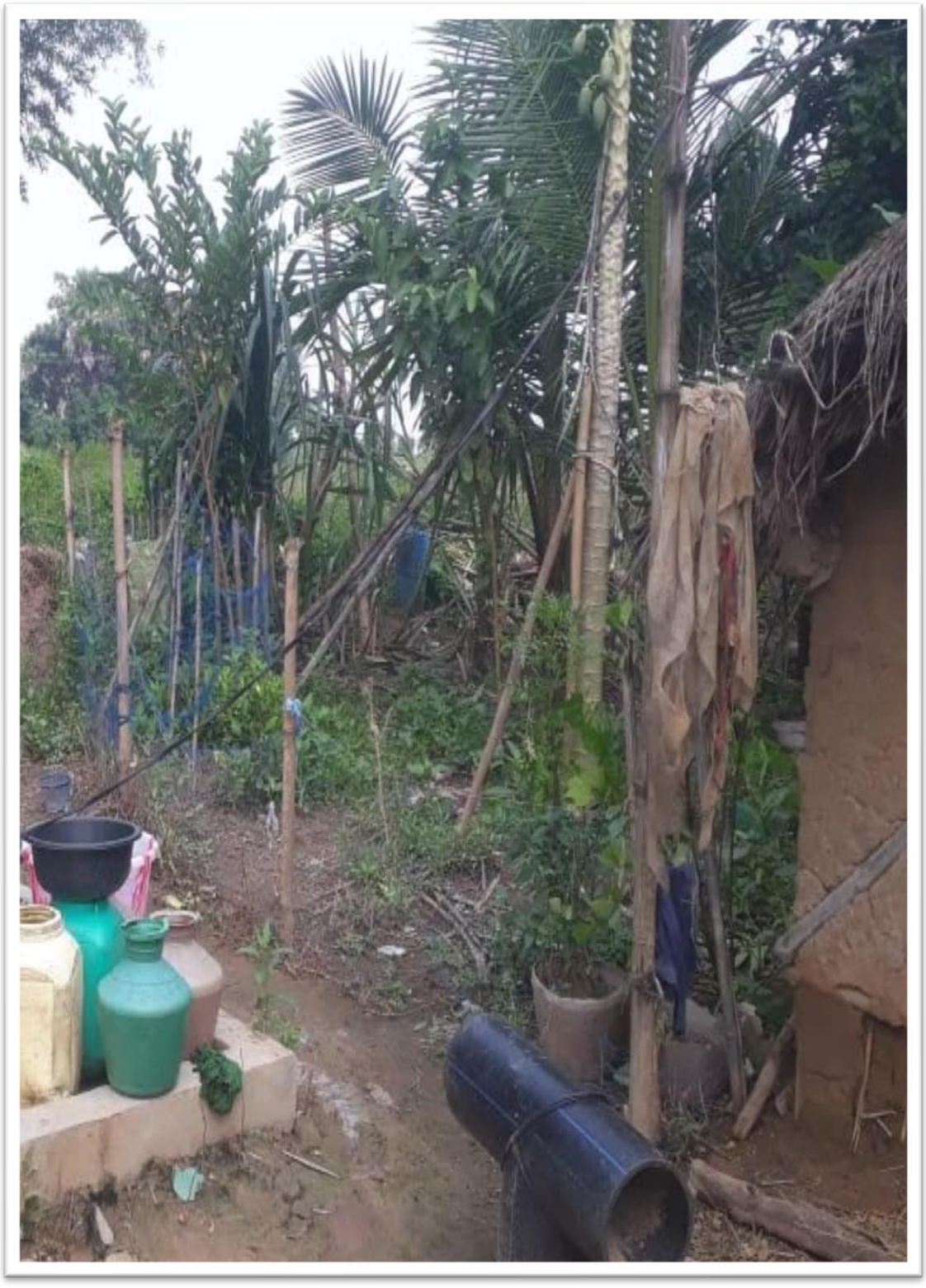

Figure 4.2: Backyard water fetching place, Bankura. (December 2022)

Figure 4.3: (Courtyards of the family at Bankura, March 2023)

In making policy reports' depiction of structural violence abstract through statistics of unemployment, poverty, or malnutrition, it is in the daily lives of people that these forces become more concrete. The women, the researcher encountered did not use a discourse of violence when recounting their experiences. They described the small, grinding denials that shaped their possibilities, including restricted mobility, ongoing negotiations with employers, concerns about their children's education, and the daily struggle with limited resources. These struggles did not occur as sudden, dramatic events; instead, they developed quietly and were incorporated into the routines of everyday survival.

A local woman in Metiabruz turned to me after a brief conversation and nonchalantly replied with a shrug and a simple phrase: "This is how it is, and what else?" "This is how it's been all along, it's completely normal." Her voice conveyed no particular stress or emotion, and she didn't seem to be sharing anything out of the ordinary. Her dismissal was not due to indifference, but rather a sign of how deeply ingrained these exclusions had become. At that instant, what might seem violent to someone on the outside is actually a part of the everyday experience for those who live through it. The essence of violence lies in its invisibility: when hardship becomes a normal occurrence that no longer registers as hardship.

The critical power of everyday life—of lived experience—comes into play here. These ordinary actions of daily life—collecting water, waiting in queues at ration shops, juggling childcare responsibilities with flexible work—are not unobjectionable customs. Historical marginalization and current exclusion have left them to bear the burden, resulting in a landscape where lack is perceived as natural and almost unavoidable. Veena Das's observation underscores that everyday life is where extraordinary events are expressed in subdued ways, with violence becoming integrated into the less conspicuous aspects of normal life.

The vulnerabilities of Muslim women in Kolkata and its surrounding rural areas cannot be comprehended in isolation: they are influenced by a wider field of exclusions that affects their status differently than that of Hindu women or Muslim men. The labelling of their challenges as "ordinary" is a telling indicator of how power functions by rendering systemic dismissal as a seemingly natural occurrence.

Documenting daily routines is more than just recording them, it's about revealing how violence manifests in our lives. Violence is often understood as an abstract concept, but it is most clearly apparent in the everyday experiences of ordinary people. It gradually develops, becomes entrenched over time, and integrates itself into habits, silences, and concessions that seem instinctual. What may appear as minor irritations or accepted norms are, in reality, the accumulated remnants of exclusion—each rejection of education, limitation of movement, or unspoken compromise forming a weighty sediment that significantly impacts women's lives.

The everyday, however, is never solely a space of injury. Women here find ways to survive, create small forms of resilience, and assert their presence in the face of marginalization. Observing these rhythms through an ethnographic lens involves perceiving injury and endurance as interlinked, and thus never completely distinct. This orientation broadened my fieldwork, focusing attention on the subtle actions through which women persevere—actions that may appear ordinary but possess profound political significance in their continuance.

In these mundane daily routines—such as collecting water from a public faucet, negotiating with an employer, and organizing household tasks within limited circumstances—the complex interweaving of violence and survival becomes apparent. The field became legible not through grand declarations, but through the subtle language of everyday life. A casual comment of acceptance—"it's just how things are"—carried the weight of centuries. A moment's pause before responding to a query reflected the constant awareness of being monitored. As these brief, serene moments unfolded, more substantial patterns started to emerge.

What makes this violence particularly sinister is its capacity to conceal itself in plain view: it does not manifest as dramatic occurrences but permeates the fabric of everyday life, until it becomes unremarkable, even seemingly normal. Research in Kolkata and rural Bengal showed that violence against Muslim women typically does not manifest as a dramatic or sudden event. It manifests in everyday language, gestures, and moments of silence. From these interactions, recurring patterns emerged, including ways of speaking, remembering, or disregarding, which were linked to three distinct configurations.

In the month of May 2019, extended informal conversations took place at verandas, sometimes for hours, waiting for discussions to gradually take shape. The women, in question did not always refer to it as "violence". However, it persisted in showing itself in the arrangements of the houses, in the spaces between neighbors, and in the thresholds where one could see but not pass. Initially, violence was more about spatial dynamics than dramatic displays; it was more prevalent in the ordinary mappings of abandonment than in explosive outbreaks of visible confrontation. In these neighbourhoods, violence was more of a prevailing environment than a singular occurrence. As they moved through their environment, Muslim women encountered this geography of violence first-hand as a devastating everyday occurrence.

In Metiabruz, the impression that the city was gently withdrawing from me. The streets became increasingly narrower with each step, transforming the alleys that seemed to be pulling inward rather than expanding outward. Tin sheets leaned against decaying brick walls, indicating where one house stopped and another makeshift dwelling started. Sheets of plastic sagged under the weight of the rain that fell the night before, and half-dry saris hung across alleys like makeshift drapes. The air was heavy with the smell of fish from the docks, combined with the dampness of open drains. What caught my attention most at first glance were the houses themselves. Partly open doors revealed damp, poorly lit interiors with walls that had buckled, staircases that were tilted, and ceilings that had sagged due to neglect. These were not isolated signs of decline, but instead were symptoms of systemic violence, where the selective withdrawal of state support had made collapse an everyday reality. The conditions of suffocating air, slippery floors, and fractured light made evident the gradual and ongoing effects of abandonment—an environment where vulnerability was repeatedly produced through systemic neglect.

Navigating through Metiabruz was more about crossing boundaries than about locating a path. Each doorway contained a body. Women leaned against doorframes with one shoulder, their eyes tracking the researcher's movement. Some clutched the children tightly, while others carried half-folded laundry on their hips, exemplifying the interconnection of care, hard work, and constant attention within limited areas. Their presence was equally neither inside nor outside. The architecture seemed to necessitate this position—women placed on doorways, signifying the boundary between home and street while observing the outside.

The room was initially devoid of sound. As the researcher walked in, the conversations stopped, and children's voices could be heard for a moment before they disappeared into the side alleys. Women's eyes, watchful and inquiring, seemed to ask unspoken questions - who is this stranger, and what does her arrival signify? This area of Kolkata was rendered invisible in dominant narratives, a space characterised by neglect and systemic abandonment. The researcher brought no cures, only a notebook and the disquieting weight of being watched in a terrain where mistrust and self-preservation were indistinguishable.

Sitting on a charpoy in a madrasa teacher's shaded courtyard, the silence was finally broken. As she sat sipping tea from small glasses, she leaned forward and said: *"We are remembered only when something goes up in flames.*" Her words conveyed the exhaustion that came from repeating herself. The phrase inscribed Metiabruz into the communal psyche of Kolkata, a place that is only brought to mind after fire, riot, or explosion incidents, rather than on the city's physical map. As the researcher progressed further into the neighborhood, women started inviting her into their homes, indicating growing trust. Saloni, a 35-year-old housewife, expressed her distress, highlighting the daily pressures and limitations facing women within a setting of systemic disregard and restricted access to resources.

> *"Yahan zindagi aisi hi hai. Ab jitna hai, utne mein hi rehne hota hai. Ha taklif zarur hoti hai. Magar, ab aadat si ho gayi hai. Meri zindagi bhi kuch iss deewaron ki tuti plaster ki tarah hai. Iss do ek kamre ki ghar mein hum 5 log rehte hai. Ha thoda paisa ho aur kismat sath diya toh do room ke ghar mein jayenge. Yahin veranda mein khana banao, aur kuch aise hi guzarti hai meri zindagi."*

This translates as: "Life here is just like this. Whatever we have, we must learn to live within it. There is hardship, yes, but by now it feels almost like a habit. My life, too, is like the plaster on these walls—cracked and worn, yet still holding on. In this one- or two-room house, five of us live together. If there were a little more money, and if fortune allowed, perhaps we could move to a house with two proper rooms. For now, everything happens here on the veranda. I cook here, and this is how my life passes—contained within these walls."

As the pace deepened, it was the arrival at Farah's house (42), a housewife and a neighbour of Saloni's. She sat on a low wooden stool near the doorway, her hands moved rapidly and precisely over a slender bamboo stem. She was engaged in making *kamani* work—the crafting of kite sticks—where the blade of her small knife was shaving the bamboo with precise skill. A small heap of bamboo shavings on the ground indicated the considerable time she had devoted to the task. As she lifted her head, her face broke into a warm smile, and she welcomed me, with an Islamic greeting. There was a sense of familiarity in her greeting, as we had previously met. The smile she wore could not conceal the burden of her environment. The house behind her was roughly the size of a cramped box. A sewing machine was positioned against one wall, and a bed was wedged tightly beside it, leaving barely enough room for two individuals to stand alongside each other. Every corner was already taken over by items such as furniture, cooking utensils, and essential survival equipment. Though there was a peaceful smile on her face, her conditions reflected a different story. Her house is so small that hardly if one puts a sewing machine and a single bed, there is hardly space for 2 people to stand at the same time.

The absence of space became even more visible in her daughter Zaira's daily routine. At sixteen, a student preparing for her board exams, she was cooking lentils outside, in the narrow passageway that served as a kitchen because the house had none. Balancing a pot on a small stove, she looked up at me with a smile: *"What's in store today?"* When asked if she had no school that day, she responded quickly:

> *"I'll finish these dishes and then rush. I'm a little sad—my best friend's marriage has been fixed. Her engagement is next month, just after our board exams. She wants to study. Maybe she'll complete her higher secondary, and then she's waiting for her new in-laws to give her permission for further studies." I asked gently, "Do you think she will be allowed to continue?" Zaira hesitated, then nodded uncertainly: "Maybe not, aapi."*

Her words continued to fill the narrow lane, blending with the steam of lentils and the persistent sound of Farah's knife against bamboo. Violence here did not break out; it insidiously became a part of daily existence. The veranda, which also functioned as a workshop, was the location, as was the lane that served as a kitchen, and the uncertain

futures of young women whose education was contingent upon the approval of their future in-laws rather than their own aspirations.

Instances like these showed that violence was not as dramatic as its geographical impact. The space existed in homes that were too small to accommodate a kitchen, in corridors that had been converted for household use, and under the burden of societal expectations that restricted women's lives. Farah's quiet resilience and Zaira's hesitant optimism collectively mapped a geography of abandonment—where walls were crowded too tightly together, and where the very possibility of studying, working, or stepping outside was held captive to both physical and social frameworks.

Periodically, one would sit on a veranda where vegetables were being peeled, and local news was being discussed. Someone would follow a child into the back room of a tailor's shop where mothers were attaching sequins to colourful saris under the buzz of a single light bulb. In each of these encounters, space conveyed a sense of importance. The veranda was never simply an enlargement of the house—it was a clearly distinguished border: women could step out just far enough to communicate with me, but no farther than that to prevent entering the public street. The tailoring room functioned as a workplace and a refuge from the public disapproval of men outside.

A younger woman named Zunaira, likely in her late twenties, spoke to me while leaning against the doorway of her one-room dwelling. Behind her, the dim outlines of her mother and sister were visible, listening in complete silence, their presence heavy though wordless. “Even the walls here make it clear where you are not allowed to go. It would be unwise to overstep our boundaries. Inside too, there is no space,” she said. The walls themselves bore testimony to her words—crooked paint peeling away in long strips, plaster crumbling at the corners. A faded wall hanging showed the sacred scenes of Hajj, its colors dulled by years of smoke and damp. A wooden shelf was crammed with her son’s schoolbooks and yellowed newspapers, and above them, carefully placed, rested the Holy Qur’an, a book of Hadith, a *janemaz* (prayer mat), and *Bahishti Zewar*.

Zunaira gestured quietly around her. The narrow kitchen walls were lined with tin containers of rice; bedding was rolled and stacked into corners, taking the shape of the space that barely held them. A single sewing machine sat pushed under the window,

crowding the only source of light. For her, violence was not just about the restrictions on her movement but was inscribed in the very structure of her home: “The house holds everything, yet grants space for almost nothing.” The next day, Zunaira invited me again to her “humble home,” as she called it. This time, it was for a women’s *Tablighi Jama’at* gathering linked to the nearby mosque. To refuse would not only have seemed discourteous but would also have meant losing an opening into the intimate, spiritual rhythms that quietly shaped their everyday lives.

The following day, visiting back to Zunaira's home as she had asked me to come. Upon my arrival, the cramped room was already packed—women seated cross-legged in tightly arranged rows, their scarves drawn low, the air heavy with the aroma of incense and cooked rice drifting from the adjacent lane. Softly wrapped books in floral material were delicately positioned on laps, awaiting their pages to be turned.

A significant portion of the gathering was focused on acquiring dini knowledge, which involves the gradual development of religious education and the performance of Islamic rituals. The women took turns reading aloud from Fazā'il, maintaining a steady tone, and listened to stories of virtuous women that were narrated during instruction sessions. Texts like Hikāyat al-Sahāba and Bihishti Zewar were highly valued, their worn covers and handwritten annotations a testament to years of frequent use. These stories carried significant moral implications: they portrayed women from the Islamic past who had motivated their fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands to join jama'at, thereby influencing devotion through the men they dispatched into the world. Between recitations, Zunaira whispered to me, "We repeatedly hear these stories so that we don't forget our responsibility." A woman's faith is demonstrated by her guidance of her family towards the right path. A woman, likely in her forties, spoke softly, "We may not go out for tabligh, but we find some refuge in this."

She further added,

> *“wo unko samne dekh rahi ho? Wo yahi kuch mahino se aksar aati hai yahan. Uski shauhar ne usey talaak de diya hai. Wo yaha aakar behtar mehsus karti hai. Dekho bechari kya karegi, yahan hum sab kuch na kuch tarike se madad ki koshish karte hai. Aur deen mein usey dukhi*

rehne ka time bhi kam jata hai. Yeh bhi ham apne kaam ka hissa samjhte hai." (Zunaira, Metiabruz).

This translates as, "Do you see that woman sitting there? She has been coming regularly for the past few months. Her husband divorced her. She feels a little better when she comes here. What else can she do, poor thing? We all try to help her in some way or the other. And here, with *dīn*, there is less time left for sorrow. We also see this as part of our work." (Zunaira, Metiabruz)."

The way the gathering was organised carried a certain significance. Women entered the courtyard quietly, adjusting their dupattas as they walked in, where mats were already arranged in tidy rows. They positioned themselves side by side, the space soon becoming crowded until there was hardly any room to move. A thin curtain separated the courtyard from the women, who heard the voice of the amīr, firm, authoritative, yet unseen by them. His sermon was familiar, recalling the need to bolster one's faith, to dedicate time to Tabligh, to fine-tune daily practices, and to integrate Islam into every facet of life. Women listened with their heads bowed, some nodding, others whispering prayers quietly, while restless children pulled on their sleeves. During the recitations, passages from Fazā'il and accounts of virtuous women were read aloud, treasured texts that had been heard numerous times yet continued to hold significance. What resonated with me was less about the spoken words than the overall atmosphere—it was the way the women leaned into one another, nodded in recognition of shared challenges, or exchanged brief smiles across the mats. The gathering provided them with not only spiritual guidance but also a rare opportunity for collective space, carved out in a life that was otherwise confined to narrow walls and congested verandas. In that space, their voices could harmonise, albeit quietly, while the burden of everyday existence was temporarily alleviated by the rhythm of prayer.

As the session came to an end, the women gave dua, their hands raised in perfect harmony, whispering personal prayers. For some, it was due to health, children, or a better standard of living; for others, perhaps quietly, it was for the chance of a less restrictive life. As we dispersed, the courtyard slipped back into its usual quietness, yet for those few hours, it had been transformed into a unique landscape of trust and camaraderie, superimposed over the maps of abandonment.

Metiabruz exposed the extent of urban neglect, while Bankura revealed its counterpart in rural areas. Violence left an unmistakable imprint of poverty on the landscape itself. The villages visited were situated at a depth within the forest, accessible only after traversing lengthy stretches of uneven terrain, where the red earth became sludge during the rain.

In the villages of Bankura, the Muslim community resides in stark and profoundly revealing circumstances. Frequent excursions into these interior regions, typically situated near dense jungles, uncovered a common linguistic framework of scarcity. Almost every household is constructed from mud, its walls coated with clay that cracks under the intense heat of summer and becomes alarmingly soft during the monsoon. Fully constructed brick houses are extremely uncommon, fragile symbols of striving amidst a vast and insecure environment. Living in these homes is a matter of dwelling within the earth's vulnerability.

During rainy periods, water seeps through the low door thresholds and floors become slippery with mud. The air inside becomes quickly unbreathable, heavy with smoke whenever women try to cook in these confined spaces. One woman named Shaheena (45, married Bankura) in Jamjuri, pointing toward a clay hearth under a banyan tree, remarked:

> "*ghor e jayga nei, tai ei gacher tolay mati lipa chulor upor rannā kori, ar pasher pukur theke bason o kapor dhui.*" *("There is no space inside the house, so I make a clay hearth beneath this tree to cook. I wash utensils and clothes at the pond nearby.").*

Her words resonated across the villages. In Chingani, another woman added, almost with a shrug:

> *"বৃষ্টির সময় তো ঘর ভেসে যায়। তখন পুকুরের ধারে থাকতে হয়। কাপড় শুকাই ঝোপের গায়ে।" ("During the rains the house floods. Then we must stay near the pond. We dry clothes on the bushes.").*

Such statements were not delivered as complaints but as everyday truths, normalized and habituated through repetition, made ordinary by necessity. The banyan tree is

converted into an outdoor kitchen, the pond's edge is utilised as a washing station, and the bushes surrounding the forest are used as an improvised clothesline. These practices are not just a response to poverty but also strategies for survival that involve spatial movements. Women's bodies constantly move across boundaries between their home, a courtyard, a pond, and a tree, turning public areas into an extension of their domestic space. Everyday tasks like cooking, washing, and drying, which are usually done in private, are carried out in full view of the neighbours, strangers, and people passing by. Living openly in close quarters creates a unique kind of closeness: life is not isolated but constantly shared with the scrutiny of others. Privacy erodes, not by intention, but due to the sheer inadequacy of walls.

As the researcher travelled through the villages, saris and children's clothes were frequently observed drying on bushes near the jungle's edge—silently indicating limited domestic space, makeshift adaptations, and the gendered work that supports daily life in precarious circumstances. The fabrics, rustling in the breeze and catching the light, flapped delicately against the stark backdrop of poverty. Women bent over the ponds, their hands moving in rhythm as they slapped wet clothes against stone, engaged in conversations about illnesses, dowries, and the increasing cost of rice. The pond served both as a source of water and a location where people shared stories, discussing their survival in short, fragmented moments between tasks.

What stood out most in these spaces was the reduction of life to its most basic necessities. Many families live in houses made of mud, which are fragile structures constructed from the earth around them. Fully built brick houses are a rare sight; when they do appear, they are a testament to years of hard work and dedication. For the majority, daily life takes place within earthen structures, which are consistently susceptible to rain, erosion, and instability. Life here is characterised more by endurance than by stability. The real battle is not about progress or growth, but merely about survival—for ensuring one's own and one's family's existence from day to day.

Figure 4.4: Spaces of home (Bankura, June 2023)

In these villages, survival is a tangible reality, demonstrated through activities such as rebuilding walls after heavy rainfall, cooking under makeshift outdoor hearths, or transporting water from distant ponds to meet the most basic household requirements. These endurance strategies necessitate substantial physical and emotional effort, accompanied by ongoing negotiations of limited resources. On one side, a government sign leaned precariously, its lettering severely corroded by rust, almost completely obscured by a tangled curtain of wild creepers. The policy existed only as a faded promise; the signboard was more of a ghostly presence than a guide. The lack of attention was not unusual — it had become a normal part of daily life, blended so seamlessly into the routine that hardly anyone seemed to notice it. It is, in many ways, a state of din ana, din khana—to bring the day, to consume the day.

Figure 4.5: Local school at Bankura, December 2023

Each practice was centered around the fundamental elements: earth for shelter, fire for sustenance, water for hygiene, and air frequently clouded by smoke. Here, violence revealed itself not as a public spectacle but as a gradual, relentless draining of energy—walls that began to collapse, bodies that worked tirelessly, and futures that were envisioned solely in terms of mere survival. In these areas, Muslim residents typically resided in densely populated areas comprising mud homes, their daily routines intertwined with those of Adivasi and low-caste Hindu neighbours, mirroring social patterns influenced by economic disadvantage and historical exclusion.

One elderly woman, Jamila, told me how her husband left each winter to work in a brick kiln near Durgapur. “Ei maati banchaye na,” she said softly—*this soil does not sustain*. Her words carried both resignation and defiance; the land was parched, but their ties to it were immovable. Women here spoke constantly of scarcity: of how much rice was left, whether the rains would come, if the remittances from sons would arrive on time. And yet, evenings often gathered into slow conversations, women sitting together under dim lantern light, gossiping, singing, weaving threads of kinship that cushioned their precarious lives. Shahina, in her late 30’s is married and have two kids. Initially, encountered hesitation, a reaction influenced by the spatial restrictions of her surroundings and the more general social restrictions that determined women's mobility and personal privacy in disadvantaged communities. She later started conversing with hands moving swiftly in washing the vegetables. She sighed, and looked around,

"Ekhane dekhcho ki condition? Jol er ja obhab, khub chaap jaye go. Eto jol er obhab! Jano ei jol er byabostha kortei amar jibon theke porashona maati holo. Ekhon dekhchi oi ek e jinish ghotche amar bodo meyer sathe. Ami kintu oke porabo. Ami o chaitam. Mepe byabohar korte hoy. Jibon toh emni koshto kor, bhabo tar opor Jodi khabar ba rojkar kaajer jol e na thake. Etar jonne je koto bhor e uthte hoy. Tumi hoyto bhabbe, tobe bhalo jayga jayina keno? Tai toh? Emon noy je hindu barira amader ghenna kore, ba taray. Amrao dugga pujoy jayi. Ora o ashe eid e. kintu shohor e je ekta somosya."

This translates as:

("Do you see what the condition is here? The shortage of water, it weighs down so heavily on us. Such a scarcity of water! As if arranging for water itself ruined my chance at education. Now I see the same thing happening with my elder daughter. But I will educate her. I wanted it for myself too. We have to ration and measure every drop. Life is already full of hardship—imagine if, on top of that, there isn't even water for food or for daily chores. For this, we have to wake up at such early hours. You may wonder, why don't we go to a better place? Isn't it? It's not that Hindu households here hate us or drive us away.

We go to Durga Puja, they come for Eid too. But in the city, there is a different kind of problem.")

Later that afternoon, a similar scene unfolded in Chingani village, Bankura. In June 2022, the researcher revisited the household of Asma Khatoon, a 45-year-old married woman, who was already familiar from pre-pandemic fieldwork. Previous observations in Kolkata and Hooghly had shown similar housing crises, prompting a need to engage in a more in-depth conversation with Asma Bibi. In the evening, upon her husband's return from work and the children finishing their daily Quran studies, they promptly focused on their schoolwork assigned by their local school. Asma Bibi and her husband smiled when asked about their decision to stay in this situation, despite facing daily difficulties, providing a narrative that contradicted initial expectations, highlighting the complex interplay of resilience, negotiation, and limited choices in everyday life.To

quote her,

> *"Aj o gramer chitro ta emni achhe—Musolman somaj ar Hindu somaj pasapashi thakleo, tara Hindu somajer bhitore jayga payna. Ete amra shorashori Hindu somaj ke dosh di na, kintu fol ta spostho. Hinduder mohollar moddhe Musolmanra ghor kinte pare na, jomi kenar sujog o payna. Fole ki hochchhe, Musolman somajer jono shonkha jokhon bare, tokhon ora nijeder somajer vitorei aro vire jayga khujte badhyo hoy. Majburite ora sorkarer onek duure giye subidha ba alpo dame thakar jayga khuje ney. Kintu sekhaneo abar school, hospital, rasta—ei shob subidha onek dure thake. Tobu bachar jonno ora ei apos mene ney, karon tader hate temon rojgar ba takar sujog toh nei."* (Asma Khatoon, 45, Chingani, Bankura, June 2022)
>
> This translates as:
>
> ("Even today the village looks like this—though the Muslim community and the Hindu community live side by side, Muslims do not find a place within Hindu society. We do not directly blame the Hindu community for this, but the outcome is obvious. Within Hindu neighborhoods, Muslims cannot buy houses, nor do they get the opportunity to purchase land. So, what happens is, when the Muslim population increases, they are forced to find space within their already crowded community. Often, they shift further away, into areas where government land or cheaper housing is available. But in those places, schools, hospitals, and roads are all far away. Still, in order to survive, they accept this compromise—because they have neither steady earnings nor the resources to choose otherwise.")

The landscape of Bankura echoed, in its own manner, what I had noted earlier in Metiabruz. In one place, violence was recorded in thresholds, courtyards, and crowded stairwells; in another, it was inscribed on mud walls, banyan-root kitchens, and the constant movement of women between ponds and hearths. Across different districts, the maps of violence exhibited a shared underlying structure: the space itself served as the means through which deprivation was experienced, gendered, and sustained.

Figure 4.6: House of Asma Khatoon, July, 2022

Hooghly presented a picture of quiet everyday normalcy rather than grand displays, its streets characterised by widespread abandonment. A meandering access road passed by tea stalls and informal vendors before tapering into uneven lanes, where mud and asphalt existed together in a haphazard manner. Middle-aged men sat on charpoys, playing cards in small groups, as the bazaar progressed in its own unique tempo: women haggled over vegetables, children held onto scarves, and bicycles navigated through crowds carrying precariously loaded sacks of rice. Life seemed thick and oppressive, yet somehow unfinished—a reflection of the fragility of its underlying systems and the unequal distribution of resources. A closer examination showed that Muslim parapets were not alone, but existed alongside other communities, revealing complex patterns of social and spatial divisions.

At the bend in the road, a group of houses signalled the start of a Muslim community. The signs were discreet yet persistent: women in burqas moving between vegetable stalls, the soft sound of the Quran being recited from a madrasa room, men leaving in groups for the mosque at prayer times. They were not invisible boundaries, nor were they physical walls, but rather ingrained spatial customs that had solidified into divisions. Hindu residences, characterized by their courtyards, lime-washed walls, and deities' images at entryways, appeared to conform to one particular pattern, in contrast to Muslim homes, which were more compact and less ornamented. The homes themselves served as evidence of complex pasts of exclusion. Crumbling walls were patched over with tin sheets, while tarpaulins were loosely hung and secured with bricks to prevent them from being blown away. In certain inner courtyards, handlooms which were previously used for weaving are now still, their wooden frames shrouded in dust, serving as a reminder of a bygone era of artisanal craftsmanship that has been superseded by cycles of underemployment and migration. The interior space was compressed into a single room that served multiple purposes, including a bedroom, kitchen, and storage area. Utensils shone from stacked shelves, as rolled-up quilts, children's schoolbooks, and a sewing machine vied for the same corner. The line between private and public spaces was constantly blurred, with little distinction between the two. Conversations within these homes exhibited a dual quality - the practicalities of subsistence were intertwined with subtle signs of exhaustion.

A middle-aged woman, kneading dough on the floor, commented in Bengali:

> “Shob kichu ache, kintu shob kichu ekshathe ache.” ("Everything is available, but it's all crowded in."). Pointing to the open drains outside, he added, "Brishti holay shob dhuke jay."

Everyone lives with water. When it rains, everything becomes flooded. We reside alongside water. Their words described the inconvenience and everyday violence that's so deeply ingrained in life, often appearing invisible due to its normalisation. In Hooghly, violence manifested itself not through abrupt eruptions but through the gradual constriction of space — in overflowing drains, in homes that encroached on one another, in dwindling livelihoods. The narrative of these paras, however, is far from being complete. The lanes of Hooghly, while tracing the outlines of seclusion, also extended outward, linking Kolkata via train, river, and road - in which Muslim neighbourhoods, more densely populated and visibly segregated, exhibited a distinct yet connected mark of marginality. Moving from the Hooghly into Kolkata meant not to escape this geography, but to see it redefined in sharper, more urban forms.

The railway line from Hooghly into Kolkata carried more than passengers. In each compartment, there were fragments of daily life: men heading to sell goods in Barabazar, women carrying baskets of embroidery work, and young boys holding school bags that appeared to be too heavy for their shoulders. The movement was ceaseless, oscillating between the city and the river's opposite bank, and still, arrival in Kolkata had the sensation of transitioning into a completely different sphere of existence. Kolkata was distinguished by even more apparent divisions than Hooghly. The city was revealed in disjointed sections, and within each section, Muslim communities coexisted as integral yet distinct components of the urban landscape.

In one overcrowded district, tin-roofed hovels stood alongside buildings dating back to the 19th century, and the aroma of biryani from street vendors blended with the odour of overflowing sewage. As dusk fell, the scene changed: rickshaw pullers took a break under the faint glow of streetlights, women congregated in doorways sharing quiet conversations, and boys played cricket in alleyways so narrow that the ball would ricochet off the walls after each shot. A woman leaning on her doorway told me quietly, “Baritey kono jaiga nei. Shishura ekhanei khele, ar shara din jal aar gondho sathe

lorai.” (“There is no space inside the house. The children play here, and the whole day we fight with water and stench.”). Her phrases infused home restriction with the texture of the street. In the areas near the docks, a different rhythm could be found in the winding streets further west. Mosques of modest size stood nestled between dilapidated ware-houses, their green domes barely discernible above a skyline cluttered with tangled wires. In this area, poverty was fundamentally linked to material deprivation: overflowing drains, large amounts of rubbish, and power outages that plunged entire blocks into darkness. In a house cluttered with utensils, bedding, and children along three walls, a young mother demonstrated her sewing machine, which had been squeezed into a window ledge. She said, "Din-raat suiye kaaj korte hoy." Here, there is work, here there is leisure, and here there are duties. "I must sew day and night in this corner, where we spend our days, our nights, and our working hours." In these spaces, labour, survival, and suffocation existed simultaneously without differentiation.

Further areas of the city highlighted the population density with greater clarity. Houses were firmly positioned along the edges of canals, their walls covered in a thick layer of moss, and the atmosphere was weighed down by moisture. The main roads were filled with shops and small workshops, including tailors, mechanics, and bidi rollers. However, just a short turn into the side streets revealed a completely different scene: narrow, poorly lit alleys where sewage was seeping into the ground, where children were playing barefoot in the mud, and where women, dressed in worn-out saris, were waiting in line for water from a single handpump. In one house, where kitchenware, bedding, and kids filled the same three walls, a young mother demonstrated her sewing machine that was squeezed into the window sill. In these spaces, labour, survival, and suffocation existed simultaneously without differentiation. Another stretch of the city highlighted its density in even clearer terms. Houses were firmly positioned along the edges of canals, their walls covered in a thick layer of moss, and the atmosphere was weighed down by moisture. The main roads were filled with shops and small workshops, including tailors, mechanics, and bidi rollers. However, just a short turn into the side streets revealed a completely different scene: narrow, poorly lit alleys where sewage was seeping into the ground, where children were playing barefoot in the mud, and where women, dressed in worn-out saris, were waiting in line for water from a single handpump. *“Shorir ta kharap hoye jacche. Jol antei pran shesh hoye jay.”* (“My body is failing. Even fetching water leaves me exhausted.”) Her voice, low and

matter-of-fact, carried the weight of a life shaped by infrastructures of absence. Similar smaller areas reflected these conditions in softer expressions. Houses were constructed on an improvised basis rather than for long-term use — blue tarpaulins draped over bamboo frames, plastic sheets functioning as temporary doors.

In each of these neighborhoods, the signs of exclusion were both apparent and concealed. They were visible in collapsing drains, the absence of streetlights and overcrowded homes, but invisible in their normalization. Living among such infrastructures meant accepting their destructive nature as normal, adapting one's body and daily routines to accommodate water leaks, power outages, and stifling environments.

In the villages, kaccha houses remained, comprising structures made of mud, clay, bamboo, and palm fronds, their roofs either thatched or patched with tin. On initial inspection, they appeared robust, a testament to years of accumulated knowledge about constructing with the resources the earth provided. Each season revealed the fragility of their construction: walls were eroded by monsoon rains, roofs were shaken by cyclonic winds, and scorching heat penetrated the thin coverings in the summer. Electricity supply was irregular, water was drawn from shared hand pumps, and sanitary facilities were either non-existent or used by multiple individuals.

Women would typically get up early, carrying brass pitchers on their hips, and walk long distances to collect water before the line became excessively long. They spent their days maintaining wood or kerosene fires, looking after children, and tending to small plots of land. The isolation of these villages from administrative centres meant schools, hospitals, and opportunities for work were scarce. A building that resembled a home from the outside was, in fact, a location where daily survival depended on makeshift arrangements due to the lack of infrastructure. Poverty concentrated people in densely packed housing clusters in smaller towns. Narrow lanes wound between houses-built side by side, with roofs patched using asbestos or tin. Multiple families occupied a single room, where cooking, sleeping, and living areas became indistinguishable.

Women went about their daily tasks in an atmosphere choked with smoke and humidity, with children playing in narrow alleys that also served as drainage channels. Unlike the villages, some opportunities for earning money existed—such as embroidery, tailoring,

or selling goods—that women pursued to increase their household incomes. Small contributions played a vital role in keeping families united, serving as fragile lifelines in an otherwise confined environment.

In Kolkata's Muslim ghettos, the sharpest edges of exclusion have become apparent. As soon as I entered, the first thing that caught my attention was the complete quietness. It was suffocation, not peace. Homes were closed off early, their windows were secured with iron bars, and the buildings stood precariously close to one another, with cracked and discolored walls bearing the signs of neglect. Winding lanes, only just wide enough for a bicycle, resembled veins through the settlement. Inside, women lived lives confined by both spatial and societal constraints. The air was thick, faintly illuminated by sunlight that struggled to penetrate through the narrow openings. In one house, Sabina greeted me with some hesitation. A one-room home had its roof covered with plastic sheets; three generations of women resided within. A mat lay stretched across the cracked floor, where her elderly mother-in-law, her young daughter, and herself sat. She spoke softly, saying,

> *"This is our world. A wooden chest contained their clothing, with a shelf above it holding religious texts, a few steel plates, and a kerosene lamp for the extended power outages. Sabina explained that they only go out when it is unavoidable. The market is quite a distance away. Going solo is not an option. My husband or son is free, so they take us. We'll have to wait otherwise."*

Her words bore the weight of repetition. The nearby mosque could easily have been considered a separate entity from the rest of the city, due to the fact that women were not permitted entry. Faith, devotion, and prayer were confined within its crumbling walls, giving the impression that religion was largely confined to the home.

In a different house, a group of women congregated in the subdued light of a solitary light bulb. Moist walls displayed streaks of monsoon seepage, and a torn curtain divided us from a compact kitchen where a child was stirring lentils. The voices of the speakers were hushed as they recited passages about the virtues of patience and endurance. Their faith provided stability, yet it also defined the limits of their reality. Upon inquiring, if they had ever longed to see life beyond their neighborhoods, they laughed—not with

amusement, but with incredulity. “Where would we go?” one of them inquired. What struck me most in Metiabruz was the overwhelming smell. Rubbish littered every corner, spilling onto pathways until children had to tread carefully through narrow, muddy stretches just to reach school. The women told me that this was normal, one of them saying, "We spend our lives this way every day, we spend our lives this way every day." Drainage issues, blocked waterways, and large quantities of waste had become an integral part of daily life. What unsettled me was how closely deprivation sat beside privilege. The houses were situated just a short distance from the local councillor's residence. The women drew attention to the newly painted walls of his property, which had been freshly whitewashed, whereas the drains near their own homes were emitting a foul smell. "When you look at it," one woman gestured, "there are a lot of big houses here. In this place, there will be a fire in our eyes like a stench. "Just look at the enormous size of their houses, and meanwhile our eyes are watering from the terrible odor."

The proximity of privilege to deprivation is striking, almost theatrical. Away from stagnant drains, crumbling roads, and women struggling under the burden of daily existence, lies a stark manifestation of systemic injustice. The Constitution guarantees equality and dignity, but in this situation, those rights are being put on hold, becoming empty promises due to neglect. In these areas, survival is not about personal preference, but rather a prolonged display of resilience that occurs out of sight of those in positions of authority, and it involves a daily balancing act with a government that chooses its priorities and offers protection irregularly. What these districts offered glimpses into various issues—poor drainage in Bankura, water scarcity in Hooghly, and cramped rooms in smaller towns—ultimately intensifying these strains into the overwhelming density of the urban slum in Kolkata.

Crowding overwhelmed every area. Whole families were living in solitary rooms, overflowing into the narrow alleys. Each year saw an increasing number of families arriving, comprising internal migrants seeking employment in the docks, tailoring establishments, or embroidery factories. She asked where they would be made. People often stand on the roadside. "People are sitting on the roadside as if it were their living room." (“Here people are sitting on the roadside as if it were their drawing room.”). The roads themselves suffered under the strain of this congestion. They appeared to collapse

under the strain—distorted, fractured, and repaired with poorly aligned bricks. Due to frequent overflows from a drain in one lane, the road had become permanently sloped to one side, slick with algae.

Women described their daily walks as navigating a war-torn terrain, stepping over puddles, balancing their children, and carrying grocery bags. The two sat together, recounting their tale with a mix of laughter and exasperation. "This is our life," one person said. This has continued for a long time. Their voices were calm, but beneath the calm, a deep sense of exhaustion was evident, stemming from the harsh realities of living with overflowing drains and mountains of trash, and the knowledge that even when electricity was within reach, the city could not accommodate them. This was not extraordinary violence, these appeared as small harm. The lives mapped in the districts beyond were not challenged by Kolkata. Conversely, it condensed them. The phenomena that were scattered throughout villages and small towns are now more pronounced and concentrated within the urban landscape of the city.

In one ghetto after another, Muslim lives took place in areas where neglect was not a rare occurrence but the norm, where physical isolation contributed to social exclusion, and where the city itself seemed to function unevenly — favouring some while severely restricting others. One distressing situation occurred when, I met Roshni Ijaz (23, MA student, resident of Hooghly). In Kolkata, when students of universities and colleges who had traveled from different districts searched for a rented place or a paying guest accommodation, they often faced unexpected hurdles. One such incident was vividly shared by a young student, recently enrolled in the Master's degree course in English at a prestigious state university in Kolkata. Roshni, recalled her horrific experience, which left her traumatized and heartbroken upon facing the harsh reality of society. In her words,

> *"I have always fought for studies, even neighbors of my society and in fact the community have known me for this. The time I did well in my undergraduates, I wanted to study at this University and had plans to apply for a PhD. It took me a lot to convince my parents for this. Though they were not agreeing to send me and let me stay alone here, it took almost 2 years to be here. Now, I face a different issue, I had no idea about how to navigate, even how to process this internally. People do*

not rent or accept us as paying guests as well. I have faced severe scrutiny. From being accepted to instant rejection the moment they saw my Aadhar card. At first, I thought they were suspecting it as fake, but then I logged into my account. Later they said, no it is authentic, but we don't rent to Muslims. Maybe this sounds strange, since Bengal has been one of the safest havens and a secular place. These instances do occur, maybe not in loud fanfare, but silently. After about a month or three, I was finally able to get a rented 1BHK flat, though that was also not an easy task. You know even my male cousins faced these issues. We often hide this issue from parents, because what if they get scared and take us back, it will be the end of our dreams too."

Nasreen (36, married) from the Hooghly districts mentioned during a casual evening on the eve of Milad-un Nabi in the late 2022, that,

"….it is often difficult for us to get a home in a better neighbourhood. Sometimes, I wonder what is the reason? At times like any other community fellow living outside and seeing these hateful videos, I feel scared that is it happening here as well. The fear is obvious these days. But I want to tell you, it is not about our Hindu neighbors, we have lived with them for decades, generations after generations. What's happening is weird. My husband is a worker, plumber and also as a part time he does the wood furniture work. He was telling me, that where am working currently, it is surprising that most of the workers are Muslims, be it Urdu speaking or Bangla speaking, it is 90% Muslim. What's surprising is that none of the family residing or is about to shift here is Muslim. I asked him, why is it so? He told me, maybe it is time for us too, that we change for the better, even we need to be open minded and encourage education…right education. We all are brothers after all."

The issue appeared to be real, though not loud but as steady and silently. Over an extended period, the sites visited showed a gradual shift towards seclusion and the formation of spatially defined ghettos. A local ceremony in Bankura hosted by a family who welcomed the researcher led to a troubling reflection on the paths of marginalized communities, prompting concerns about the ways in which their lives are being directed

under circumstances of systemic neglect and social exclusion. The family is highly educated and lives in proper Bankura town. Unlike the villages and typical Muslim family interior, this reflected a somewhat different appearance. The book shelf was neatly decorated with minimalist environment. Along with Holy Quran, and religious book, there were bangla literature and novels, from Rokeya to Rabindranath Thakur to Indian constitution. Aunt Faiza is a graduate and now his son is a government employee. Her husband a retired school teacher. In one conversation with Aunt Faiza, she leaned forward and told me,

> *"See, this is an old story, about a decade ago. We have been living here since our great-grandfather's time. I remember one incident vividly. A janaza was passing from the nearby graveyard, and just ten meters away, a Durga Puja pandal was in full celebration. We had even been invited by the Puja committee, and as a Muslim family, we were standing nearby, about to enter the pandal. Strange as it may sound, yes, we were invited."*

Her voice softened as she recalled what followed. "But something happened that was truly problematic. Men from both sides became anxious. The janaza needed to pass, and the Puja organizers had their own time constraints, with no other way to reach the Muslim burial ground. Tension was thick in the air. It was then that a pandit guru stepped in and resolved the matter with such grace. He allowed the janaza to pass, ensuring the dead received the utmost dignity and respect." Faiza paused, her eyes glistening, and then repeated his words, as if they were etched in her memory forever: *"I don't think Ma would be angry if her other son's dead body is going to be buried, even if he crosses the pandal."* She sighed and said, *"What he said was truly heart-touching. I wish others imbibe it too."*

At that moment, the deep silence she had described became noticeable: the crowd as a whole paused, holding its breath as the conflict escalated and unfolded, much like a loosened knot unraveling itself. The quietness exposed more than strain—it signified the subtle workings of social control, collective self-restraint, and the daily balancing of exposure in a space defined by systemic inequalities and marginalization. The men stepped out of the way, the coffin was carried through with dignity, and the ceremony resumed. A potential rift turned into a brief, precarious moment of mutual existence,

one that, although unstable, was undeniably characteristic of humanity. For Faiza, this memory was more than just the janaza or the pandal, it was about how quickly harmony or hostility can depend on the words of one person at one moment. It became clear that Faiza's account encompassed not only her own experiences but also the structural limitations and everyday compromises that influenced life within her community. Life in this context was a continuous balancing act between faith, space, and belonging, maintained through delicate social and spatial relationships that were easily disrupted, exposing the vulnerability inherent to marginalized lives.

What struck me most, however, was how such experiences are remembered – not as celebrations or ceremonies in themselves, but as encounters at the intersection of contrast. It was not state structures or secularist institutions that sustained coexistence, but rather the compassionate actions of a solitary priest who prioritized empathy over separation. The urgency of his words highlighted the vulnerability of the situation, which involved a narrow passage, a body to be buried, a goddess to be revered, and the risk of either side feeling offended. The story of Faiza served as a reminder that harmony can be achieved. The harmony revealed how fragile it is, built through daily compromises and relying on acts of kindness that could quickly disappear. The stillness of the women at the entrance to the pandal, the nervous fidgeting of men in the crowd, the way the bier moved swiftly once permitted – all conveyed how everyday lives are carried out on the brink of instability, where reverence and exclusion, acceptance and feeling like an outsider, coexist within the same confined areas.

In Bankura, the nature of survival differed significantly. Walking long distances before dawn was necessary due to water scarcity, which also made it challenging to balance household chores with academic study. The constant was the weight of scarcity and responsibility. In even wealthier households such as Faiza's, daughters balanced domestic responsibilities with their studies, knowing that not meeting household demands could swiftly overshadow any academic achievements. In Hooghly, wage labor and household responsibilities became closely entwined. Early in the day, women rose to prepare meals, collect water, and do cleaning tasks, afterwards often engaging in activities like sewing or selling goods, occasionally for neighbors' small requests or their own families' financial gain. Survival was never an option, but rather a delicate dance with limited resources, external pressure, and self-imposed duty.

Figure 4.7: Kacca Road leading to Muslim family homes, beside the main road, August 2022.

As the researcher departed her home and proceeded towards the interior villages of Bankura, the disparity between urban living conditions and rural life became starkly evident, underscoring the unequal allocation of resources and infrastructural neglect across the area. The narrow lanes gave way to muddy roads, interspersed with open drains and stagnant water, transforming the streets into impassable routes during the monsoon. Women rose early, carrying buckets across the wet ground to collect water from nearby wells or shared water outlets. Open areas would quickly turn into muddy ponds due to heavy rainfall, requiring both children and adults to travel through hazardous terrain to obtain basic necessities.

One morning, I accompanied a local woman, who I will refer to as Salma, to the village well. With each step, her small feet clad in a sari sank into the muddy path. Frustration was evident in her voice as she explained,

“Jibon ekhane onek koshter. Ei jol e toh jibon, ar shei jibon e eto koshto kore jogaar kori. Panio jol e niye amader meyera school jete parena. Karon bhat boshabo kokhon, ora ki kore na kheye jaye. Khub koshto o hoy ar raag o hoye.” ("Life here is full of struggles. Even the water itself, which is supposed to sustain us, becomes a source of hardship. Our daughters cannot go to school because fetching water takes up so much time and energy. When will they have time to eat properly? What happens if they go without a meal? The strain is constant, and it brings both exhaustion and frustration.").

In Metiabruz, a comparable scenario was visibly evident, with women consistently drawing water from the community's handpump. Similar practices were observed in certain areas of Kolkata and Hooghly too. While many flats and houses have access to municipal water supplies, the families in question cannot make use of this service. Her words created a vivid picture of the daily hardships she faced: fetching water, guaranteeing her household's survival, and striving to keep aspirations alive for her children despite systemic neglect. The water shortage, she stated, was not a short-lived nuisance but a persistent reality that affected every decision, every instant of the day.

Neglect of infrastructure was evident beyond water provision in these villages. Basic amenities such as sanitation were lacking, electricity supply was unreliable, access to healthcare was far away and poorly equipped. Young girls were frequently taken out of school to assist with household chores or accompany their mothers on daily tasks. Structural and social inequities intertwined with scarcity and infrastructural marginalization, forcing women to constantly negotiate for survival and bear the impact of these inequalities. What particularly caught my attention was the way the hardships faced by these women, residing in rural Bankura, aligned with Faiza's preceding narrative. In town, mutual existence with other communities depended on acts of empathy and negotiation; in the villages, survival depended on endurance, improvisation, and careful navigation of daily hardships. Both urban and rural areas, as well as towns and villages, showed the same fundamental reality: women's lives are profoundly influenced by the interplay of social norms, structural neglect, and individual agency. These narratives of material neglect led directly into the field of education, where women's ambitions were limited not only by poverty, but also by subtle forms of social control.

In Metiabruz, the streets were severely congested and littered with rubbish, with overflowing drains creating stagnant water that formed hazardous puddles. The internal migration had left no space for new buildings, with people frequently sitting at roadside junctions as if they were their homes. Living areas such as kitchens and verandas were adapted as multifunctional survival spaces, occasionally being used as makeshift classrooms during periods of lockdown. The vulnerabilities in question became more pronounced during the COVID-19 period. Informal labor vanished abruptly. A young woman, Parveen (20, student, Kolkata) once stated, *"How can I do five to seven hours of classes a day? My father lost his job, my brother is small, my mother and I are alone. The internet barely works. My mobile is so poor I thought of quitting my semester".*

She then stated that this hadn't been true for many of her fellow students. At home, she and her younger brother shared a single smartphone as part of their family's struggle, in contrast to some of her friends who were able to afford their own tablets. The weight of compromise landed entirely on her: she was expected to take on household tasks, to sew, or, if fortune permitted and someone was kind enough, to prepare meals in a neighbor's home for a modest remuneration. What caught my attention was the extent to which the boundaries of discrimination exceeded the confines of one's own home. Girls who joined online classes via shared devices were frequently reprimanded by teachers, as if their financial difficulties were somehow a wrongdoing. Landlords also refused them accommodation close to schools, highlighting that education is not only a challenge of accessibility, but also a place of exclusion. Sufi, a young woman, shared:

> *"We were doing well in subjects, but insulted constantly. A single fault and the usual 'you people cannot do anything.' Sometimes, we stayed away by choice."*

In a world that was unfriendly outside, the inner environment was equally complicated. The walls of the house, typically seen as secure areas, turned into sites of conflict where women's desires were being controlled. In the dimly lit, small rooms where the girls sat with me, education was revealed as a battleground rather than a privilege. The weight of exhaustion hung in their words, as if lessons, chores, and accusations were all equally burdensome for them. For the teenage girls and young women, education was not just about attending classes, taking exams, or earning degrees — it was about gaining some independence in households already struggling with limited resources. As they reached

for this vulnerable territory, their goals clashed with intersecting domains of influence – external marginalization, internal sexism, and the substantial burden of religious control. A young woman from Metiabruz shared her thoughts with me,

> *"Even when I was able to log in, teachers would scold us for sharing devices. They treated us as if we were common beggars for wanting to learn. The complaint was also not limited to devices or classes. The matter centered around dignity."*

People outside were skeptical about their ability to learn, while those close to them often saw their persistence as a form of disobedience. A young girl in Hooghly spoke in a hushed tone, *'My uncle advised that studying excessively can lead to forgetting one's prayers. Girls become more uninhibited after reading books. It is wise to marry early rather than becoming reckless'.* The words were softly spoken, conveyed through sighs, murmurs, and cautionary messages. Control functioned through a combination of force and guilt, with the persistent awareness that a girl desiring too much was considered threatening. Ambitions were turned against those individuals in more subtle ways, often through the use of guilt.

A mother would express frustration that the rice had not been washed because her daughter was engrossed in her studies, reading; a father would grumble that their neighbors were watching her leave home too frequently. Even joking with friends could be used as evidence that education was having a corrupting influence on them. This was not just patriarchy but what one girl referred to as a "psychological pressure at home." A conflict was fought not with physical violence but with verbal attacks — guilt, shame, insinuations — in which girls were led to believe that striving for ambition was a moral transgression. "She was told that delaying marriage to finish her degree would make her careless, out of control, and un-Islamic."

Here, education did not serve as a neutral route for social mobility, but rather a contested area where women's aspirations conflicted with religious control, patriarchal norms, and economic uncertainty. Those who continued to face obstacles found that they did not disappear at home, but re-emerged in classrooms and workplaces, transformed into suspicion, ridicule, and exclusion. A few were able to withstand the pressure. Families with slightly more stable financial situations – a father in the civil

service, a mother who had once been a student – sometimes permitted their daughters to continue, though always with trepidation. For many others, however, the negotiation came to a sudden halt. Marriage here served less as a celebration and more as a means to pre-empt the unpredictable future that education could potentially lead to. My regular visits often helped me gain a closer perspective on their lives, as well as their real voices—voices that were frequently camouflaged by silence, discipline, or seclusion.

During one such visit; I had the chance to speak with a young woman from Central Kolkata. Yusra, now in her early thirties, had completed her undergraduate degree at a reputed private college in Kolkata and later pursued a B.Ed. She appeared calm and composed, but after a long conversation about the state of education among Muslim girls in West Bengal, she began to share her own life experiences. Yusra recounted a harrowing episode from her past:

> *"It was during my third year of undergraduate studies that everything turned ugly. My stepmother wouldn't allow me to attend college. My friends tried their best to stay in touch and keep me updated. One of them even used to send me notes through Facebook messages, so that they wouldn't get deleted. I will always remain grateful to my friends, who not only supported me but also informed my professor about the difficult situation I was in. But it didn't end there. They arranged my marriage with a divorcee in his mid-forties, who already had two children. My father was working abroad at the time, unaware of what was happening. They even took away my phone."*

Yusra's story resonated with that of another young and promising student from Kolkata district. Zahra, 22, originally from Patna in Bihar but educated entirely in Kolkata, had excelled in her studies, graduating at the top of her class in Political Science. Intelligent and outspoken, Zahra dreamed of pursuing higher education and preparing for the civil services. Yet her eyes grew moist as she recalled how distant that dream now seemed. She explained how, even during her undergraduate years, her family and relatives pressured her to marry:

> *"They kept saying I had studied enough to manage life. I tried my best. I would even spend extra hours in the college library preparing for civil*

service and other government exams. When my final semester results were declared, I found I had topped my subject. But tell me, what use is that now? Even though my husband is supportive, convincing the entire family of my dreams is nearly impossible. My siblings too are relieved that I've settled into what they consider a normal life—though to me, it feels like a life of compromise."

Batool too shared a similar experience in Bankura, although it was even more pronounced in Metiabruz and Hooghly. She recounted this when she invited me to her sister's wedding. In the midst of the ceremonies, I asked her why the marriage was taking place so early. She smiled, then drew me aside to a corner, hesitant to speak openly in front of relatives who had also received me warmly. Lowering her voice, she said:

"This has been the norm. Even my abba once gave me a cycle for school—can you imagine? Now I spend my days going around the ponds and cooking. Where are my lost books and my pencil box? Sayra too wanted to study, but dear, with the economic constraints—and who is going to argue with them? — it is almost impossible. I had to compromise between household chores and my studies. And then there is this famous erom e hoy ['this is how it is']. I don't know who the real villain in our lives is: the financial crisis or the religious disciplining. All of this was reinforced by my mother. She says that if girls are educated more than what is necessary, they bring bad luck to the family, and will create havoc in their marriage."

At weddings and Eid celebrations, sisters and mothers frequently spent extended periods in the kitchen. It was not just about cooking, but about how their labor dictated the household's daily routine even on special occasions. It wasn't theirs in the same sense. An elderly woman once reflected with quiet resignation, saying,

"I have accepted this fate. It initially belonged to my father, afterwards it passed to my husband, and now it is in the possession of my son. I've never seen what freedom looks like. Domestic spaces, especially kitchens, are where women's autonomy is restricted and their

involvement in public celebrations is overlooked, according to such eyewitness accounts."

The rituals of celebration themselves perpetuate hierarchies based on gender, transforming what should be a shared experience of happiness into another occasion of isolation and unequal division of labor.

In districts across Hooghly, Bankura, and Kolkata alike, women's accounts revealed how mundane routines entwined them in cycles of being overlooked, where silence and a sense of obligation supplanted choice and autonomy. The shift from household control to institutional mistrust exposes the movement of identical exclusionary logics across different areas.

During fieldwork, it was found that early marriage and domestic confinement comprised only one aspect of the situation. For those who were able to withstand these pressures—pursuing higher education or seeking careers—the oppression did not diminish but merely changed its nature. Young women in Hooghly, Metiabruz, and Bankura recounted how they were repeatedly discriminated against and subjected to Islamophobic suspicion in classrooms, offices, and examination halls.

Listening to these narratives often made me uncomfortable, which reinforced how deeply they were already connected to public stereotypes of shame. Her classmates reportedly dismissed her ambition by saying she was "bringing purdah into the classroom." The very first question put to her by employers was not about her academic grades. The question that always came up was, would your family allow you to travel. The question asked was whether you would wear that scarf to the office, but their words showed that agency did not eliminate constraints; it simply shifted their locations—from households that wanted to arrange marriages for them, to institutions and employers that controlled them through Islamophobic methods of suspicion.

Firdous (20, Kolkata), expressed the conditions of her life. She has joined a Sociology Honours undergraduate course at a college in Kolkata. However, things were not as per her wishes. Due to pressure from relatives and family, she was married off at 18. Though she recalls that she came back to continue to study, but her low attendance and responsibility at home, overburdened her. Firdous in her words,

"I tried my best, I felt ashamed that once I said to my teachers, I will become a teacher and here I am on the edge of quitting my studies. I conceived early, and I just couldn't manage everything at once. I lost friends, since they couldn't connect with me anymore. I will do everything for my child.".

Similar lived experience was shared by a young woman in Hooghly, Alayna (21, Hooghly). Alayna shares she was married at an early age of 19, due to her deteriorating health of mother. Her father demised when she was 3. I her words,

"*Early marriage came as a shock to me. I was extremely skeptical. I never wanted to marry at this age, where I had dreams of becoming an IAS. I had no other chance, since it was me and my mother and I didn't want to rely on my extended family. Though, my husband had supported me in studies and even my in-laws never treats me as an outsider. I was a mother at the age of 21. I dropped a semester, and joined again. Completed my graduation. My husband has told me explicitly, this is your life, your dream, and I will always support you in every way possible. He was used take care of baby, post his office and I could complete my preparation. But this is not the reality for many. At least my agency was not curtailed under the guise of religion and patriarchy. Today I work at a private company."*

Another similar instance that was prominent during this stay. It was Waniya (21, Kolkata), who completed her undergraduate and fashion designing course from Kolkata during the pandemic. Waniya remarked that,

"I am grateful to my parents for supporting me, especially when I saw my classmates and girls from other departments who didn't even get the chance to complete their studies or were forced to leave after just four semesters. Today, I am in Abu Dhabi, independently working at one of the top premium companies. Education is powerful, but not everyone is able to gain that consciousness—whether due to fear, religious policing, or social pressures. Often, it is the external environment that creates this condition of deprivation, but we must fight back, no matter what the world says. That is what education gives you."

In Hooghly, Nida, a 24-year-old, who had secured a teaching position after achieving the highest grades in her undergraduate degree. She recalled how her colleagues would make comments about her veil with a forced sense of humour. *“They claim, 'You're too traditional for a contemporary learning environment.”* At times, I question whether they're listening to my responses or merely noticing the scarf I have on. Even in job interview settings, she was subjected to questioning: colleagues ridiculed her, inquiring as to how they could have confidence that she would be capable of performing her duties. Despite her impressive performance and successful interview, there were whispers that she did not meet the required standards. She elaborated on further incidents related to her decision to wear the hijab.

A professor directly insulted her by asking, *"Why do you wear the hijab if you are talented academically?"*. She stressed that her academic ability was equivalent to that of any other student in the class. When the friend later passed her government exam and informed the professor who had been previously aware of her struggles, there was no indication of pride or support. The professor pointed out to her friend, “She was fine initially, but as soon as she secured the position, she became a different person and began wearing the hijab.” These moments demonstrate the subtle yet enduring disciplining of women that is rooted in Islamophobia. Achieving success, such as obtaining high grades and passing competitive exams, does not protect individuals from scepticism, ridicule, or negative judgment based on their appearance and religious identity. The personal decision to wear a hijab frequently leads to questions about competence, illustrating how the effects of invisible violence can be seen in domestic, educational, and professional settings.

An undergraduate from Kolkata described how, despite having an English-medium education, she was frequently teased. This was not an isolated incident; numerous girls from Urdu-medium schools endured persistent harassment, their self-confidence and morale were greatly diminished, despite their academic achievements being exceptionally good. Support was consistently a last resort, with humiliation preceding it whenever it finally arrived.

Fear of repercussions led many girls to be cautious in their conversations. One confided: "We're frequently ridiculed to the point where we're afraid that if we express our discontent and it gets back to our parents, they might jeopardise our education." We are

already engaged in a different fight in any event. While conducting my fieldwork, witnessing a particularly striking occurrence. A group of young students recounted going to a community event, only to be dismissed by the organiser, who responded, "What will you all achieve by studying?" No gain is obtained. The comment was particularly disappointing because the person in charge belonged to the community and was involved in community service—someone they might have expected to back their aspirations. The experience visibly unsettled the students, showing that even in well-known settings, subtle forms of discouragement and gatekeeping were widespread.

The experiences of these students were marked by numerous, frequently unobtrusive instances of prejudice. Wearing a hijab may lead to exclusion in sports or classroom settings, making participation a matter of compromise. This prejudice was not limited to classrooms and instead pervaded public areas, such as transportation and other communal spaces, where discrimination persisted, constantly reminding them that their presence was subject to scrutiny. However, the most striking moments took place during conversations about post-graduation plans. A professor interjected, "You will just get married and move to Dubai!" You fail to grasp the nuances of culture. The words had a profound impact in the room, highlighting that ambitions were preconceived and that futures were evaluated more on the basis of assumptions about religion, language, and gender rather than talent or hard work. These experiences collectively demonstrate that educational environments are not neutral, but rather frequently serve as contested territories. Students must navigate both the expectations of their families and communities, as well as the subtle influences exerted by their peers, professors, and the overall institutional culture. The process of learning is influenced by stereotypes involving ambition, skill, and diligence, transforming it into a complex process of negotiation and resilience that can sometimes involve unseen forms of violence. Their reflections indicated that education was never solely a matter of resources or ambition. The issue was deeply intertwined with cultural expectations, economic difficulties, and the discreet regulation of women's life paths. What was striking in Batool's hesitation—and in her mother's warning—was the way the limits of what was deemed "necessary" in education were repeatedly redrawn to confine women to predetermined boundaries.

Several women recounted on their daily lives, despite being miserable and challenging as the new normal. During my stay at sub-urban, interior of Metiabruz. One such event, Hushnara Begum (40, Metiabruz) has recently lost her husband in an accident. Though promised a compensation, which she mentions was never credited to her. And her being just standard 5 pass, was difficult for her to navigate the complexities of issues at her hand. Hushnara states,

> *"Given all the crisis I had, and now I have I cannot commit a suicide, its wrong and is a crime. Who will look after my kid. I have to be strong, that what I can do. I will make sure they get the education.".* She further added, *"I will fight back this. Our neighbor Amina bibi too faced this situation. She does embroidery patchwork assignment. I got a job as a cook nearby. And I have decided to do this patchwork embroidery after I return home. For me religion is a refuge and solace. I cannot stop my girls from studying. Education was always necessary. I had financial constraint, but my child will not face this."*

The question which Hushnara and others raised was piercing and haunting. Who cares about the cornered destitute Muslim women? The fact that women has been subjected to intersecting crisis is evident when I had the chance to have a in depth conversation with Meherun Nisa (45, Bankura). It was not just eye opening for me but the conditions through these women have led their life is difficult to generalize. Meherun Nisa was hestitant to share her most horrifying incident of life. But with trust and empathy, she shared almost a year later in 2022. She vividly shared,

> *"I lost my father when I was five. At eighteen, I lost my mother too. After that, all I had was my brother and sister-in-law. I managed to complete higher secondary school, though I was never considered good at studies. Then I was married—told it was to a young man in his early twenties. Only after reaching my in-laws' home in Srinagar did I realize the truth. The man I had been introduced to as an uncle was my husband; the young man I had been shown before was his son, my stepson.I had no phone, no one to call. I knew only Bangla and a little Hindi, and just enough English to get by. I soon understood that money had changed hands between my brother and my new family. For months I lived in*

silence, cut off, unable to make myself heard. At last, I confided in the stepson. He put me in touch with a Bengali migrant worker from my village, and through him, I escaped. But at what cost? I had nowhere to return to. My certificates had been burned, swept away in the Ganga. I began working as a house-help. To be obedient is one thing; to stand against the odds is another."

The constraints on women's lives in Bankura and Metiabruz were not confined to marriage, domestic work, or being excluded from education; they also extended into the areas of health and personal care. In many villages of Bankura, access to medical care was often inconsistent, and women frequently had to cope with illness and injury alone. Numerous villages were connected by unpaved roads and lacked nearby hospitals. Daily health requirements were met through these arrangements, but they were not a replacement for more extensive care. A young woman recalled having to travel over two kilometers along uneven, muddy terrain to reach the nearest clinic while suffering from a severe fever.

As a result, residents, particularly women, frequently depended on local healthcare professionals, including Asha workers, for essential medical care and advice. Her father worked in a town at a distance, and the responsibility was left to her mother and older siblings, who themselves had to contend with limited mobility and financial constraints. She observed that a delayed delivery of care is a typical occurrence. By the time we arrived at the clinic, 'I was already feeling quite weak. There are no proper roads for transport. In some cases, even water and sanitation are not readily available, and we often have to proceed without waiting for someone to accompany us.'

In Metiabruz, health crises were compounded by domestic and social pressures. Household duties frequently took precedence over the women's own health issues, according to the women themselves. Even while pregnant or struggling with chronic illness, they were expected to carry out daily household tasks, cook meals, and look after children and elderly individuals. Even though, within a radius of roughly ten kilometres, numerous hospitals were present, yet timely and high-quality treatment was not consistently available. One nursing home, under the management of a single doctor, frequently requested women to wait for extended periods of time. Women repeatedly expressed feelings of frustration and uncertainty when the care they required was not

readily accessible. Despite being close to hospitals, things do not always happen on schedule. A resident expressed frustration, saying "You keep waiting and hoping, but it is never enough," which encapsulates the persistent feeling of inadequacy within the system. Further, women's health issues extend beyond physical problems, resulting in profound mental and emotional impacts. The chronic stress resulting from delayed or inconsistent treatment, combined with household duties and social pressures, contributes to anxiety, worry, and, in some instances, depression. A young woman described feeling exhausted physically and mentally due to the ongoing balancing act of managing her health issues, household tasks, and educational or professional commitments, a sentiment shared by multiple participants at both locations. One such incident needs high mention, a Muslim widow, named Jahanara (53, Metiabruz) exemplifies these dynamics. She took care of her daughter, who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, at a time when her only son, who provided her with both emotional and financial support, was diagnosed with kidney complications, which eventually impacted his respiratory health. Even though they had a government health card, which was supposed to provide them with access to public healthcare, the lengthy bureaucratic procedures and the need to coordinate multiple hospital visits resulted in substantial delays and stress. Jahanara Bibi's experience in Metiabruz illustrates how structural vulnerability, bureaucratic hurdles, and gender-based marginalization can all hinder access to healthcare. She recounted:

> *“I possessed the card. The government stated it will be responsible for the costs incurred. At the hospital, I was directed to one window and then another. My son was running out of breath. I repeatedly asked. I was repeatedly instructed to wait. They requested that I locate blood donors independently; can I get direction on where to go. To whom should I be inquiring? My daughter suffers from schizophrenia. My son was all that I had left."*

At the time, Jahanara was a school-pass woman, entirely reliant on her husband, who had passed away from a brain stroke in 2021. Her son's health was critical, and she encountered significant obstacles while navigating a healthcare system that, despite being formally equipped with government initiatives and policies—such as the state's health coverage, widow allowances (Vidya Bhata), and other social benefits. Despite

being fully equipped with a dialysis centre, the hospital occasionally lacked a doctor or sufficient blood. Eventually, she had to transfer her son to a hospital in Kolkata, where he received treatment and the doctors took her circumstances as a widow into consideration. “The harassment I faced as a single widow was far more stressful than the illness itself. No one from the clerics comes to help us at these hours, but when it comes to moral policing, they are the loudest.” (Jahanara Bibi, 53, Metiabruz).

The path from disrupted education to disrupted healthcare exposes a overall framework of neglect, rather than just misfortune—it reveals. Women's lives are repeatedly fractured by institutional indifference and control, whether in classrooms, workplaces, or hospitals. Invisible violence is not concealed; it lingers in bureaucratic hallways and waiting rooms, where survival hinges on navigating apathy. Repeated ruptures build resilience through adversity, exacerbating mental pressure and highlighting the disputed influence of religion. These incidents are not isolated; they are the quiet mechanisms of marginalization, operating daily to restrict, track, and shape women's lives within strict social and spatial systems of ranking.

Silence can be a form of communication, even when people choose not to speak. In classrooms, narrow alleys, and shared verandas or classroom, quietness and subtle movements can be more significant than loud outbursts. Each dismissive glance, joke, and questioning assumption can create small obstacles that influence the choices women make and the environments they are in. The subtle structure of exclusion that is microaggressions can be almost invisible at first, yet they consistently build barriers to freedom, mobility, and self-expression.

These dynamics numerous times throughout my fieldwork. A young woman stood at the entrance of her local library, deliberating after a neighbour's comment implied that pursuing higher education was "too much for girls". In a classroom setting, a student recalled being interrupted by a professor who carelessly assumed that female students would grasp complex concepts more slowly than their male counterparts. Across the districts, whether in rural Bankura or urban Kolkata, women narrated and shared their lived experiences, whether consciously or without naming it explicitly as micro-aggression in any form. These small humiliations, subtle omissions, and persistent feelings of unease infrequently emerged in dramatic forms, yet carried its own weight of violence in their own ordinariness. Over time, these minor actions and comments—

disdainful glances, casual remarks, or unspoken social rules—built up, influencing the choices available for movement, self-expression, and career aspirations in women's lives. The ordinary, through its repetition, evolved into a framework of restriction, leaving lasting impressions on both physical form and mental state of these women. Initially these small harmless incidents- an extra security check, a suspicious gaze, or an elaborated query, appeared as normal part of life. Though, it took its root in the ordinary, everyday life, in the daily conversation of these village women courtyards, to the crowded spaces of public transport to the small classroom. These events appeared as isolated parts, but eventually it accumulated across the field sites, revealing a patterned reality, and not imagination. Several participants when asked, often themselves struggled to categorise it under the label of 'violence'. Yet, these women themselves shared their discomfort, the fear, or the constant quiet 'normalised' humiliation that became of their everyday. One women Zeenat (19, Kolkata), narrated her experience of sitting at a café in Kolkata. She expressed her shock on how she was randomly stopped and double checked since she was wearing a burkha. Similar event was shared by her friend Shagufa (19, Kolkata), "the guard stopped me and double checked my every chain of my purse. Though that was not the case to other girls or visitors. I felt extremely embarrassed. But why should this scrutiny be normalized?". A different yet similar incident was shared by University students. Meesha (22, Kolkata) and Meera (23, Kolkata), they narrated that,

> *"whenever there is any miscreant activity in India or around the globe, we are always questioned. Rather starts with subtle distance, and then we have to give testimonies as we do not support such activities. Tell me why? Is this normal? Everytime, it turns out that we have to bear the brunt. Why at all we will support something that goes against the very structure and foundations of our own country India. The othering is real, and not a fleeting feeling anymore. We, as a country is diverse and thrive in pluralism. This is what makes us, Indians."*

Meera expressed her anguish, that one of my friends recently faced issues in a metro station. She recalled that even if they were sitting quietly, the body language of the fellow passenger was deeply uncomfortable. In colleges and University, students repeatedly shared how they were made to feel inferior and excluded- through

derogatory remarks from teachers, peers or even institutional practices. These experiences direct to how microaggressions operates and undermines not only the self-confidence but also the foundational purpose of education as a space of equal opportunity.

"When I first received my scholarship at undergraduate level by the state government, instead of congratulating me, some teachers commented as 'why to waste it on them? They will just use it for marriage.' It was insulting because in my family everyone is educated. We value education. But people refuse to see that; and assume we don't deserve it." (Shaiba, 22, Hooghly, 2023)

Another incident was noted during this time, Sana (22, student, Metiabruz, 2023) narrated,

> *"One teacher often used to address us as 'they', and remarked that since we are admitted in this institution, the quality has fallen. Another time, when I scored above 85 in Political Science, someone remarked, they don't understand anything. If we do not understand, then how are we getting these percentage? These are a daily parlance, as if our achievements are worthless."*

Be it gendered exclusion or subtle mockery, these small acts of microaggression contributed to a pervasive sense of invisibility. Across the districts, it was evident that Muslim women and young girls regularly navigated these recurrent dismissals, with their achievements often overshadowed by prejudice. The intersection of gender and religion intensified this "double marginalization," shaping their experiences as both Muslim and female. Muslim women's experiences demonstrate a persistent trend throughout communities, from domestic environments to educational settings, public markets, and transportation systems: subtle forms of exclusion, dismissal, and everyday humiliation that, although frequently accepted as the norm, can collectively contribute to determining who is observed, listened to, and acknowledged over time. These small acts are not singular events; they collectively form an unseen framework that influences movement, expression, and a sense of belonging.

The researcher introduced a new framework of Accumulative Invisible Violence (AIV) to grasp this pattern. This lens highlights how small, habitual actions

accumulate to create structural and psychological barriers, connecting individual daily routines to more extensive societal and political dynamics.

The next chapter delves deeper into this framework, linking lived experiences to institutional practices and structural forces and illustrating how such violence is both normalised and perpetuated within broader systems of power.

CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETING LIVED EXPERIENCES: ANALYTICAL INSIGHTS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

This chapter transitions from the immediacy of ethnographic details to a deeper examination of how violence against Muslim women in Bengal unfolds. This chapter thus, addresses the central research question*: How can invisible forms of violence in Muslim women's lives be conceptualised through their narratives that disclose harm unrecognised by conventional definitions of violence?* The chapter demonstrates how daily exclusions, minor harms, and silences collectively form what this thesis terms Accumulative Invisible Violence (AIV).

At its core, the research inquires not simply *what forms does violence take,* but *why it endures, how it mutates, and why it so often escapes recognition as violence at all.* To answer requires, understanding those women's narratives, their stories and most importantly their lives, not from a distant, but witness it as they are. As a consequence, it becomes evident that these findings were not mere expansions of pre-existing ideas, but rather upend them and necessitate a thorough reconsideration of the conceptualizations of violence.

The daily lives of these women, their gestures, exchanges of words, and resilience, is observed in their purest, unaltered behaviour. It is in this paradox, that reveals how violence is embedded within the structures of power as natural, ordinary and continuous.

Into the Lives of Muslim Women:

The themes presented here are a direct result of interactions in the field, incorporating their voices, body language, and the embodied experiences of those involved. Recurring patterns of exclusion, negotiation, and quiet resilience become prominent beneath routine activities, highlighting the ways in which Muslim women navigate, resist, and subtly challenge the constraints surrounding them.

Muslim society is often perceived as homogenous, yet the facades conceals deep in the structures of society. A web of complex dynamic emerged, involving socio-economic systems, power relations, and daily interactions in urban and rural settings. The complexity is most visible, perhaps in the daily lives of Muslim women, whose presence in Bengal's social environment is yet frequently remains misinterpreted.

The research approached everyday life not as a neutral backdrop. But as a site where insidious exclusions and hardships accumulate, and where resilience is continually forged.

Table 5.1: Thematic Framework Table, compiled by the researcher

Theme	Sub-themes
1. Gendered Discrimination & Control Over Muslim Women	• Double discrimination – external Islamophobia; intra-community patriarchal control • Barriers to mobility – urban versus rural restrictions • Domestic violence, early marriage, and economic dependence • Moral policing by family and community elders
2. Structural and Everyday Violence	• Lack of documentation & bureaucratic hurdles (Aadhaar, NRC, welfare exclusions) • Poor access to education and government schemes • Neglect of Muslim-majority areas: infrastructure, sanitation, schools • Everyday invisibility and normalized exclusion
3. Systemic Discrimination in Public Institutions	• Institutional discrimination: police, bureaucracy, legal system • Gendered discrimination within state structures • Media stereotyping and prejudice reinforcement
4. Spatial Segregation & Ghettoization	• Forced or self-imposed isolation in neighborhoods • Fear of renting in mixed areas • District-wise variations (urban vs. rural)
5. Internalized Inferiority	• Muslim youth facing discrimination in schools, jobs,

Theme	Sub-themes
& Identity Crises	public spaces; • Workplace discrimination, especially for young women • Silence on intra-community issues: domestic violence, educational suppression
6. Intersection of Caste, Class, and Religion	• Ashraf (upper-caste) vs. Pasmanda (lower-caste) discrimination • Limited social mobility for lower-caste Muslims • Economic marginalization of working-class women
7. Muslim Women as Battlegrounds of Identity	• Hijab, burqa, modesty as symbols of resistance and control • Navigating religious expectations vs. external hostility • Double burden: Islamophobia + intra-community control
8. Rural-Urban Divide in Discrimination	• Variations in marginalization between villages and cities • Access to state resources and infrastructure (water crisis, developmental crisis) • Rigid gender roles in rural settings
9. Political Disenfranchisement & Alienation	• Lack of Muslim political representation and agency • State surveillance and profiling of youth • Fear of activism due to social/political backlash

This thematic mapping shows a progression that starts with denial and secrecy, continues with mounting shortages, and emphasizes the distinct experiences of men and women that are influenced by the interconnected social, economic, and cultural contexts. Ethnography serves a purpose that extends beyond mere access, instead functioning as a means of acquiring knowledge. It facilitates comprehension of violence as a prolonged occurrence—characterized by minor fissures, gradual leakage, and

commonly accepted injury rather than sudden disruptions. As time passes, these gradual harms gradually build up and become an integral part of daily life. Therefore, the stories of women from the chosen areas serve as key locations for the development of knowledge, and even moments of quietness expose the mechanisms of systematic violence. This approach underscores the analytical importance inherent in women's everyday experiences.

This chapter is structured in an interrelated section, with each one expanding on the previous one. The findings are situated within the ethnographic findings, extracting thematic patterns from fieldwork across Bankura, Hooghly, Metiabruz and Kolkata. These findings are placed in critical dialogue with existing frameworks of literature by the second fold. This research recognises the explanatory capabilities of these frameworks, yet also highlights the limitations of such perspectives when faced with the complex, multi-faceted nature of violence in Bengal. The third fold introduces Accumulative Invisible Violence (AIV) as a new conceptual framework.

The data collected through ethnographic interviews and participant observation surfaces consistent themes across different locales and social settings. These patterns affirm the central insight that violence is not only an episodic event but also a slow, layered process that becomes morally justified and socially embedded — precisely the phenomenon that AIV seeks to capture.

This chapter aims to excavate the patterns, layers, and silent architectures of violence that emerged through the fieldwork conducted across Metiabruz, Kolkata, Hooghly, and Bankura. It moves beyond the mere documentation of empirical experiences to engage in a deeper theoretical and political unpacking of what sustains, enables, and legitimises harm in everyday life.

Ethnographic Groundings: Tracing Patterns of Harm

Prolonged ethnographic engagement unfolded a reality experienced by Muslim women that was lived rather than merely observed. Women's accounts are often viewed as rich sources of knowledge, uncovering harm through patterns of repetition, unspoken silences, and enforced limitations. This arose from immersing oneself in the community, frequent returns to the same neighborhoods, and the meticulous tracking of the women's narratives over time, ultimately leading to the emergence of discernible

patterns.

Violence rarely presents itself as event, spectacle, or rupture. Rather, it arrives unannounced, escaping official categories that privilege disruptions and imbalance. Instead, it hides in plain sight—woven into pauses, dropped silences, resigned statements, and gestures that at first seemed unremarkable. What appeared to be hesitation or resignation eventually revealed itself as evidence of a broader architecture of harm.

As observed by Veena Das (2007), violence permeates the everyday, becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from ordinary life. The findings in Bengal illustrated this idea: violence had become so ordinary that it was almost imperceptible. Women described this suffering as a normal part of everyday life - something they had inherited, endured and rarely discussed openly. Acknowledgement was only achieved through extended exposure. The arid regions of Bankura, the migrant routes of Hooghly, the crowded streets of Metiabruz, the densely populated areas of Kolkata, were not merely locations for data gathering. Violence manifested in mundane forms of erosion, rather than as dramatic crises: in the evasion of an official's scrutiny, the pause before a signature, the lack of an Aadhaar card, or the subtle softening of a woman's tone in a bustling marketplace.

The ethnographic journey served as the epistemic foundation of the inquiry rather than a neutral research method. The forms of harm that impacted Muslim women's lives in Bengal were not accessible through policy reports, legal archives, or statistical surveys, which prioritise disruption and emergency. They needed constant focus on things that are often overlooked. What emerged was already analytical narratives, that theorized violence in ways often obscured by academic vocabularies. Not ‘raw data’ needing external interpretation. Being in kitchens, walking to schools, waiting in hospital queues, or sharing tea on courtyard steps, would involve encountering knowledge that was being generated, even when communicated through unspoken actions or expressions rather than direct speech.

Moving forward necessitates asking: what forms do these recurrent patterns assume, how are they articulated, and what do they disclose about the circumstances of life for Muslim women in Bengal? The patterns that became apparent were not tidy or

consistent. The fragments emerged—a story left incomplete, a physical movement, an abrupt silence in the midst of a sentence. It was only when they were placed in relation to one another that they started to cohere into broader formations of meaning. These are not traditional qualitative categories; instead, they are interpretive frameworks that women created in their own accounts, which was then mapped across different time periods and locations.

The ethnographer and observer, was to remain attentive to how women themselves named, navigated, or resisted the terms of their dispossession rather than imposing coherence from an external perspective. This necessitates a political reorientation since it reclaims the authority of epistemic knowledge from conventional theorists and policymakers to the subaltern subjects themselves. Muslim women's experiences become the focal point for generating knowledge. This upends traditional power structures where complex ideas are confined to the intellectual elite, and real-world experiences are relegated to personal anecdotes or examples.

According to Spivak (2010), the subaltern is allowed to speak only after her voice is reduced to an anecdote, rather than as interpretive power. In this study, the reverse principle applies: women's accounts are treated as theoretical interventions rather than background material. Complicated narratives challenge existing views on violence, protection, and belonging, providing alternative perspectives based on everyday life experiences. Bano's story illustrates this dynamic. What her family referred to as protection in reality was foreclosure: education was withheld, ambitions were curtailed, and opportunities were quietly blocked. In reality, what seemed like concern was suppression. The violence present here was not dramatic, but rather insidiously destructive—subdued rejections, bureaucratic hold-ups, and administrative indifference. At first glance, each individual event may appear minor; taken collectively, however, they generated a crushing burden that shaped the trajectory of her life.

Shabnam made a simple yet piercing observation in Hooghly. “Duniya humko alag nazar se dekhti hai!”, (English translation: "For the world views us in a different light."). Initially, this appeared to be a statement of resignation. The moment remains in memory, not because of the words spoken, but because of how they were spoken—with a sense of resignation rather than outrage, and conviction rather than confusion. This

person's statement was not an isolated remark but a culmination of their life spent living under the burden of being perceived as different, other, and of lesser value. Shabnam's words highlight how structural violence functions not only through acts of deprivation but also through a particular way of perceiving the world. The way Muslim women are perceived, classified, and controlled often stems from a distorted view of violence. This gaze is not solely attributable to poverty or communal hostility. It symbolises a profound internal acceptance of being different, the realisation that one is not simply shut out but inherently capable of being excluded.

These perspectives were repeated in the field. A male schoolteacher from Bankura, made an off-the-record comment, stating that Muslim girls tend to leave school at an early stage. In a government clinic, a medical officer hesitated before registering the name of a woman, even if proceeded, the name was often misspelled. In Hooghly, women explained that it was common for them to not possess a bank account or at times even important documents such as Aadhar card, as "no one in the family had ever had one." These were not anomalies but manifestations of a system that legitimizes exclusion until it is perceived as unavoidable.

Structural violence, as evident from the findings typically goes unannounced. Instead, it manifests through bureaucratic delays, missing paperwork, poor online accessibility, or the consistent exclusion of Muslim women from development initiatives. For example, in Metiabruz, the urban infrastructure of narrow streets and dense residential areas illustrates how urban systems perpetuate exclusion, while the wider context of Kolkata's urban environment reveals less apparent but equally pervasive forms of marginalization. Areas like Bankura and Hooghly exhibit a distinct configuration, where exclusion is worsened by spatial isolation, bureaucratic disregard, and widespread suppression. Women in these areas must frequently navigate daily challenges, employing subtle methods of defiance despite their opinions being largely overlooked. The phenomenon manifests itself in moments of silence during conversations, as women discreetly checked if they were being overheard, and in physical self-discipline within public spaces—to lower their gaze, avoid confrontation, and remain silent without resistance. The key point is that structural violence encompasses not only what is being denied, but also what is implicitly assumed.

Women from the Muslim community in West Bengal learn to anticipate being

excluded. People anticipate being doubted at a counter in an office building, overlooked in local community groups, or excluded from the school enrolment process. The assumption that women will adapt is not a sign of resilience, but rather a symptom of a deeply ingrained system of displacement that forces them into compliance.

These findings do not merely assert the invisibility of violence, but interrogates the mechanisms that render it invisible. Violence forms the fundamental structure of how people interact. In bureaucracies, state offices, local councils, and educational establishments, the script is already written. Muslim women are relegated to the periphery, permitted to be present but infrequently to be heard, and never to have control over the narrative.

The unspoken exclusions that occur in everyday life are not coincidental; they are linked to larger institutional failures, state policies, and political ideologies. The connections the findings have traced reveal how the everyday suffering and marginalization of Muslim women are reflected in the underlying structures of governance, development, and citizenship.

Ethnography, thus becomes the means of knowing rather than just a means of access. This facilitates conditions to understand violence as fracture, seepage, and normalization rather than as rupture. It demonstrated how damage mounts up until it vanishes into the fibres of existence. As a result, the narratives of the women across the selected districts, becomes a site of knowledge generation. The lived experiences of the women, particularly in moments of silences, helped identify the potential ways in which structural violence operated. This valued the analytical potential inherent in women's daily lives.

Violence as a Way of Seeing: Women’s testimonies shared a common thread across Metiabruz, Kolkata, Bankura, and Hooghly, revolving around institutional abandonment. It was not through dramatic denial or outright refusal, but through a more subtle and insidious approach—an arrangement of delay, indifference, and procedural evasion that presented itself as neutral. Here, violence was not a sudden explosion. It was an agreement. Habitual practice, when obeyed diligently, ceases to seek justification for any act (Bourdieu, 1990). Thus, habitual, normalised violence in these situations became a standardised procedure. This study critically examines the

processes that legitimise and perpetuate everyday violence against Muslim women. It highlights how access to public areas, jobs, education, housing, and state-sponsored assistance is shaped and limited by subtle but enduring structural obstacles.

Space functions as an active rather than neutral environment. The formation of exclusionary enclaves through the segregation and partitioning of space serves both to restrict and to create the perceived threat of outsiders, while also perpetuating the marginalisation of certain social groups as distinct and separate subjects. Space functions as both a material and semiotic indicator, generating meaning, conveying social distinctions, and influencing behaviour through signals indicating membership or exclusion. Some urban areas, for example, are policed and regulated in ways that clearly show certain groups that they are not wanted, effectively making them explicitly 'out of place' (Donald, 1992). One can observe how spatial practices are closely linked to processes that lead to social exclusion, marginalisation, and the perpetuation of structural inequalities when space is conceptualised in this way.

The research demonstrates that violence is a condition that alters the fundamental architecture of existence itself rather than just being an overt act of damage by looking at many different kinds of lived situations. Consider Saira, a single mother living in Kolkata. With all the necessary documents in order, she submitted an application for a widow's pension. She was requested to come back five times. The excuses given each time were that the officer had forgotten something, the form was not in order, the ink was incorrect, and a photograph was missing. In Bankura, women explained that ration cards were refused or left pending due to "technical reasons." Further, when asked why they did not protest, one woman responded calmly: "We fear protest. If we protest, they call us traitors." Her words encapsulate the dual conundrum of bureaucratic apathy and political coercion. These stories illustrate how societal prejudices are not corrected by institutions, but rather reflected, accepted, and amplified through them.

Systems intended to protect, such as education, healthcare, welfare, and documentation, have become barriers. Rather than safeguarding women from discriminatory treatment, they condition them to accept exclusion as a norm. The state was always out of their grasp, always conditional, and always somewhere else. The exclusions functioned across multiple levels. Outreach and services often failed to reach Muslim-majority villages at a policy level. Local-level access was mediated by party brokers and

informal networks of patronage. Repeated denials experienced by women as part of their multiple interactions taught them to be highly suspicious of the very institutions that were originally intended to provide them with inclusion.

This gap was further exacerbated by the digital turn. Digital, online portals often failed to load in low-infrastructure areas, and biometric failures in Aadhaar disproportionately impacted women working in informal labour. Reproductive care was discouraged due to the lack of female Muslim practitioners at health facilities. Girls who left school early were often dismissed with the label of "conservatism," but it was really about the sense of isolation, insecurity, and hostility that women described—schools where they constantly felt like they did not belong.

In order to shape the lived realities of marginalized populations, geographic seclusion is essential. The economic and social fragility of Muslim-majority neighbourhoods is exacerbated by the persistent deprivation of basic infrastructure, especially in areas with a significant concentration of working-class residents. There are several ways in which this type of spatial isolation appears. The reality is stark. Administrative processes have become increasingly tied to violent practices. All that is needed is a stamp, not a stick. The discriminatory bureaucracy ensures that even when the state includes individuals, it does so in a selective manner—granting rights as if they were concessions. Muslim-majority neighbourhoods are frequently ignored or underserved by transportation networks, which makes it especially challenging for women to access job centres, medical facilities, and educational institutions. Mobility is further discouraged by public transport's unreliability and insecurity, especially for individuals who must go alone or at odd hours.

What are considered entitlements are instead viewed as acts of benevolence. According to Gupta (2012), the state's structural violence is not limited to spectacular failures, but is also rooted in routine mechanisms of delay, oversight, and neglect. This violence is less likely to be examined because it is a standard part of the process rather than a physical act. It is often attributed to inefficiency, accidents, and "poor governance." The burden of responsibility is placed directly on women: Why didn't you follow through? Why didn't you express opposition? The original question prompted anger when women did not put in more effort to comply. Violence now sustains itself in a continuous loop—first, people are pushed away, and then they are punished for being

excluded. Narayan (2016: 90) notes that the unequal distribution of democratic resources and the failure of state-led initiatives exacerbate the economic and social circumstances of marginalized women. They remain unnoticed and unrepresented, unable to capture the attention of the government or democratic authorities. As a result, these initiatives have limited relevance in democratic systems, since development projects, welfare plans, and government assistance often remain out of reach.

In Bengal, similar patterns emerged among Muslim women, who faced structural obstacles and institutional shortcomings that mirrored the broader trends of invisibility and exclusion. What emerges instead is a systematic pedagogy of abandonment. Women are frequently taught that their sense of belonging is contingent, their demands uncertain, and their status as citizens tenuous. The state remains seemingly anonymous, yet its power is intensely personal, evident in every sphere of life that follows.

Veils of Silence: Intersectionality, Discrimination, and the Politics of Voice

The lives of Muslim women in Metiabruz, Bankura, Hooghly, and Kolkata are shaped by a complex interplay of multiple, interconnected factors of exclusion. These include religion, gender, class, geography, education, and societal perception, resulting in a structured pattern of disenfranchisement that is neither unintentional nor coincidental. Reducing their experiences to being "just Muslim," "just women," or "just poor" would overly simplify the complexity of their lives. These identities intersect to create a precise invisibility, with each one intensifying the others.

Sara Ahmed claims that emotions are not static possessions within individuals; instead, they function as active forces that influence the boundaries of bodies, identities, and social relationships. According to Ray (2019: 141), a crucial aspect of comprehending how ideologies and power structures influence the formation of self and other is the analysis of emotions, particularly shame, humiliation, and rejection. These emotions are not merely personal feelings, but are instead shaped and disseminated by social and political systems. Emotions operate as instruments of power, controlling who is included and excluded, and perpetuating systems of marginalization. This understanding emphasizes the significant role emotions play in shaping individuals, functioning as both a tool by which power is exerted and a crucial factor in the creation of social hierarchies and structural invisibility.

The internalization of violence by women is a major factor in the normalization of everyday harm. Numerous participants in this research discussed their mobility limitations, restricted access to public areas, and social pressures to conform as if they were normal or unavoidable. When institutional obstacles quietly limit what is feasible for Muslim women, this internalization results from both direct social conditioning and structural reinforcement.

For instance, several women explained how their family dissuaded them from pursuing a job because of the widespread discrimination in the workplace, the hazardous public areas, and the unreliable transportation system—not because they were against women working. The exclusion of women from public and economic life is reinforced through circumstances that make participation extremely difficult rather than through direct coercion, illustrating a gendered form of structural harm (Kabeer, 2011).

Muslim women's exclusion from public life is essentially a result of the way public spaces are structured. Interviewees stated that although public transportation was available in Muslim-majority regions, it frequently caused them discomfort through hurtful remarks, obtrusive looks, and feelings of helplessness or victimization, which limited their freedom of movement. Women from the villages of Bankura stated that occasionally they only receive a small share of the rations from the fair shop, and accessing medicine remains an unattainable goal due to the lack of nearby medical facilities. Many of these women are unaware of the benefits they are entitled to. Government welfare programmes designed to support disadvantaged communities are still largely ineffective, as these communities continue to struggle with poverty, hunger, and hardship, largely due to their limited access to these services (Narayan, 2016: 92).

Furthermore, it was commonly found that public areas including parks, marketplaces, and administrative offices were subjects of harassment, surveillance, and informal policing, which further hindered Muslim women from engaging in everyday life. These findings correspond with prior studies on urban segregation, which underscores how the structure along with administration of public infrastructure may perpetuate social hierarchies and patterns of exclusion (Harvey, 2003). Public zones that are hazardous, inhospitable, or unwelcoming help to erase marginalized groups from urban life and normalize their exclusion.

These normalized exclusions have the cumulative effect of systematically denying Muslim women chances for social integration, upward mobility, and self-determination. Because it is seen as a normal part of the social order, this type of harm, in contrast to overt forms of oppression, routinely eludes rapid response. People eventually develop a sense of social resignation as a result of this view, accepting gendered subordination, poverty, and marginalization as natural parts of life rather than as the results of structural oppression (Bourdieu, 1990). Accordingly, the study suggests that rather than being viewed as a static state, everyday structural violence should be seen as a dynamic and continuing process.

The fact that structural barriers are frequently passed off as "neutral" regulations or bureaucratic inefficiencies is one of the research's major findings. Numerous communities with a majority of Muslims, for instance, are purposefully underdeveloped, as seen by their insufficient public transportation systems, poor sanitation, and a lack of government funding for healthcare and educational institutions. Because of these factors, an institutional neglect cycle is established, which eventually comes to be seen as the "normal" situation.

According to Basant (2012), Muslim females in these regions suffer disproportionately from underfunded schools, a dearth of scholarships, and gendered mobility limitations. Structural disincentives, such as schools being far from their communities or curricula that do not take into account cultural and linguistic variety, frequently confront families that wish to educate their girls. Because of this, Muslim females' low enrolment and high dropout rates are seen as "self-imposed choices" rather than the outcome of an educational system that excludes them.

Additionally, discrimination in the workplace serves to further socioeconomic oppression. Numerous women claimed that their names, residences, or religious clothing were used as grounds for job rejection. Economic independence became increasingly challenging for individuals who were able to get employment due to workplace harassment, informal salary deductions, and a lack of contract safeguards (Hasan & Menon, 2005). These incidents show how discriminatory employment practices and unfair working conditions sustain economic hardship, which is not a passive result but an active process.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) maintained that intersectionality is not a simple arithmetic of disadvantage but rather a multiplication of vulnerability in particular social contexts. During my field research, intersectionality was not a purely theoretical concept but a lived reality: it was palpable in the uncertainties of a widow approaching the police station, in the quiet withdrawals of girls from school, in the cautious words of women who weighed every statement to avoid being labelled as outsiders. Muslim women, in this situation were not passive victims of intersecting oppressions. Their lived experiences highlight, their intimate space inhibits where harm becomes more intense, complex, and mundane (Das 2007). Their experiences compel us to consider how harm is not only masked as normal, but also settles in the everyday lives, in the form of restricted access to resources, social isolation, limited mobility, and subtle forms of control—shaping both their opportunities and interactions.

Workplace gender-based discrimination is not solely caused by patriarchal attitudes but is also worsened by religious and geographical prejudices. Muslim-majority women were excluded from employment opportunities due to their gender, as well as stereotypes surrounding their visible religious identity and socio-economic background, which often labelled them as unqualified for specific positions. This pattern of exclusion continued to be perpetuated by the employers who unfairly dismissed job applicants based on their Muslim background, especially those who wear the hijab.

Employers dismissing candidates outright due to their Muslim identity, particularly those wearing the hijab. Individuals entering the workforce frequently encountered microaggressions, were subject to scrutiny concerning their religious preferences, and were often barred from participating in key decision-making processes. Workplace hostility: Those who entered the workforce often faced microaggressions, scrutiny over their religious choices, and exclusion from decision-making spaces. Limited access to well-paying employment opportunities led to a significant number of women being drawn into informal labour markets, where they faced lower earnings, insecure job situations, and limited prospects for career advancement. Economic marginalization: Limited access to stable, well-paying jobs forced many women into informal labour sectors, where they were subjected to lower wages, lack of job security, and minimal upward mobility.

The intersectional pattern shows that Muslim women's economic disadvantage is not just an economic problem but a more complex social and political issue that limits their ability to make decisions in various areas. Muslim women's exclusion is a two-fold issue, resulting not only from interpersonal prejudices but also from the societal and economic structures that pervade their daily lives. Segregation of Muslim communities within urban areas creates further obstacles for individuals seeking employment, education, and access to public facilities. Women from predominantly Muslim areas with low economic status frequently encountered job market rejection, largely attributed to their place of residence, which further entangled economic and religious forms of marginalization.

The Grammar of Double Surveillance:

The intersection of gender and religious identity became strikingly apparent in the research. Muslim women recounted how they were subject to dual forms of discipline: scrutinized by the broader community's public eye and controlled by the internal expectations of their own neighbourhood.

A school teacher in her early 30s, sitting in her one-room rented home in Metiabruz, spoke to me with a half-smile:

> *"Bahaarwale humein ajeeb samajhte hain. Aur hamare hi mohalla ke log kehte hain zyada sapne mat dekho, tum bigad rahi ho. Fir hum kahaan jayen?"*
>
> *("People outside treat us like we are aliens. And inside our own locality, if we dream too much, we are told we are becoming 'modern' in a bad way. Where do we belong then?" Schoolteacher, 30s, Metiabruz).*

Her words shed light on the paradox of belonging. Within the community, she is expected to have modest aspirations, while outside it, she is viewed as an outsider. The double bind not only restricts options, but also produces what I refer to as the grammar of dual oversight. Her voice here refuses to simplify exclusion to a single dimension. She highlights the impossibility of fully belonging anywhere, a state of perpetual marginalisation. Her inquiry is genuine—it pertains to the core of existence. The paradox of not belonging, in public institutions, socio-cultural, and political

community, is captured by the idea that being visible outside is stigmatizing, while being visible inside is simultaneously threatening. Thus, causing the space for aspiration to collapse. This is not merely a personal issue but rather a cultural indicator of how Islamophobia and patriarchy intersect to form a system of dual monitoring.

A young girl Rida in Hooghly district, just 19 years old, put it in even sharper terms:

> *"College jana hai, par rasta mein log hansi udate hain… gharwale kehte hain shaadi kar lo. Dono jagah se roka jata hai." ("I want to go to college, but on the way, men mock us… and at home they say get married. We are blocked from both sides.")*

Here, the street and the household do not constitute distinct entities; instead, they function together, limiting movement and making education a desirable yet unattainable goal. A cartography of Islamophobia is revealed, with the boundaries of movement determined by both community bias and internal conservative pressures.

Many women who sought jobs outside of their neighborhoods reported encountering both direct and indirect prejudice. Muslim women are frequently seen by employers as "risky hires," especially when they are dressed in religious garb, which perpetuates their exclusion from professional spaces. This results in the standardization of employment patterns, which restricts women's economic freedom by keeping them in small-scale community enterprises or home-based labour. At this point, intersectionality transitions from being an abstract principle to a tangible, everyday experience. The women's voices demonstrate that experiencing oppression is not a cumulative effect (where being Muslim and female combine to create a double disadvantage). It operates in a multiplicative manner. In such contexts, a Muslim woman pursuing education often faces suspicion in public, strict control within her home, a lack of engagement from teachers in schools, and condescending behaviour from officials in government offices. She is always already defined by multiple factors—never neutral, always identified by a particular characteristic.

Spatial marginalization in this context is not solely about being geographically peripheral. The sentence describes how space itself is imbued with patriarchal and communal connotations, and how a woman's body becomes a site where Islamophobia and patriarchy are exercised. This ethnography reveals a logic of impossibility, where

women's daily interactions do not result in increased mobility, but rather frequently lead to resignation, silence, or self-regulation.

Muslim women frequently experience scrutiny in public settings because of their gender or religious identity. Several expressed feeling uneasy at government buildings, medical facilities, and even marketplaces outside of their local communities, which made them reluctant to interact with areas that ought to be open to everyone. The perpetuation of assumptions about Muslim communities limits social engagement, promoting the belief that integration is neither desired nor achievable.

This dual gaze does more than limit movement. Every action, from walking to school to applying for a job or attending college, requires constant consideration of both the community's distrust and the need to integrate with the community. This is not merely a case of the type of surveillance described by Foucault's concept of the panopticon, in which the subject internalizes the gaze of power, but rather what can be termed layered oversight, where conflicting gazes converge to form a subject that is constantly examined and never fully accepted in either context.

Recognition is never completely secure. It is subject to rationing, conditional approval, and perpetual scrutiny. Butler's (2009) concept of conditional recognition sheds light on how lives are distinguished and is grievous; however, my field research broadens this argument, showing that the appropriateness of being a ‘good Muslim woman’ is often catalysed by the norms and unacknowledged by the state as even a form of harm. They are trapped in a self-reinforcing cycle. This consequence involves more than just restricted opportunities; it fundamentally erodes an individual's ability to act. In this scenario, agency is not represented by opposing or gaining power in the traditional liberal sense, but rather as survival through adaptation.

Often, the restricted mobility of women is negotiated by the pressures of external surveillance. They learn when to be quiet, when to step back, when to show compliance, and when to assert themselves cautiously. These micro-strategies are not failures of agency; they are agency adjusted to conditions of structural hostility.

An intersectional subjectivity, thus emerges that cannot be solely attributed to either gender oppression or Islamophobia. For these women, intersectionality is about more than a descriptive framework of multiple disadvantages; it's a lived reality of epistemic

precarity, where they are denied the authority to define themselves on their own terms. Their existence is influenced by others' perceptions, making them "visible" but unrecognized, "present" but lacking legitimacy. Being doubly monitored between external perceptions of being an outsider and internalized feelings of deviance, intersectionality manifests as a lived experience of constant oversight, ultimately resulting in a life shaped by conditional acceptance, survival through compromise, and uncertainty about knowledge.

Intersectionality refines this visualization. Kimberlé Crenshaw cautions that it is not the straightforward accumulation of disadvantages but rather the compounding of vulnerabilities in particular settings. This phenomenon was intensely tangible during my field research. The girl from a rural area in Hooghly faced multiple hardships not just due to poverty, gender, or her Muslim faith, but because she was simultaneously poor, female, and Muslim in an area lacking institutions that could understand her struggles. Where one resides becomes a factor in the suffering one experiences. As the space dictates not only what resources are accessible, but also whether deprivation is acknowledged.

Exclusion was never limited to external factors. A woman observing college students in Hooghly lamented: "If cleanliness is next to godliness, even sitting together on the same table is disallowed...Why should it matter if both are Muslim?" "In a family that makes a living cleaning, you might not even be allowed to sit at the same table as them, even if you share the same faith." The unsettling discovery highlights what I refer to as intra-community policing: the reproduction of caste and lineage hierarchies within already vulnerable groups. According to Foucault, power is a diffuse force that spreads through various channels, including gossip and internalised rankings and exclusions within marginalized groups. Exclusion here does not eliminate power—it reconfigures it into intimate forms of discipline, ensuring that even those who are excluded learn to exclude others.

These neighbourhoods are frequently far from banks, government buildings, and universities. Because many women find it difficult to navigate governmental settings alone, this not only maintains gendered limits on mobility but also increases reliance on male family members or intermediaries for access to fundamental services. Social stigma associated with "Muslim areas" worsens exclusion. Families find it challenging

to move to locations with better resources because of discriminatory rental and housing rules brought about by negative preconceptions. Ghettoization is not an accident; rather, it is a structural result of policies that uphold pre-existing geographical borders and fail to question restrictive housing practices.

By limiting mobility, economic engagement, and access to resources, these structural restrictions collectively ensure that segregation is an enforced reality rather than just a result of "community preference." Muslim women in the regions under investigation frequently spoke of feeling "kept apart" from society at large—not because of explicit legal prohibitions, but rather because of accepted exclusions from public life, work, and education.

The layered nature of harm revealed itself in the muted silence of villages. On the surface, Bankura and Hooghly presented a picture of peace, with no riots and no open hostilities. Beneath the surface of this seeming tranquillity, a stifling silence existed. Girls dropping out after completing Class 8, domestic abuse being tolerated within the community, and early marriages justified as a tradition were normalized to the point of invisibility. Silence has evolved into an ultimate manifestation of structural oppression. Repeatedly, the lack of open confrontation is misinterpreted by state officials, NGOs, and academics as proof of "communal harmony."

Silence in this context is not equivalent to peace; it is a manifestation of submission, resulting from neglect and the lack of institutional involvement. Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence still applies, yet ethnographic research refines it: in these villages, harm is evident not through sudden disruption but through the acceptance of deprivation becoming the norm. The notion of harmony actually conceals suffering by making it routine.

The vulnerability of the situation intensifies as marginalized women interact with the government. A widow in Kolkata said to me: “When I go to the police station, they ask if my husband was involved with terrorists—he was simply a tailor. They don't trust our claims.” Her testimony highlights the conditional nature of citizenship itself. Access to institutions such as police stations, welfare offices, and hospitals is not viewed as a guaranteed right but rather as a precarious privilege. The state is perceived not as a neutral mediator but as a suspect entity involved in the creation of insecurity.

Gupta's (2012) theory on the state's structural violence is supported, but the ethnographic findings go further: for Muslim women, bureaucratic mistreatment is not just neglect, it's also being singled out. In these interactions, citizenship is never secure; it's always dependent, constantly at risk of being withdrawn at any counter, any checkpoint, any bureaucratic situation.

These accounts collectively expose a complex environment of harm rather than discrete disadvantages. State scrutiny from the outside, internal enforcement of community hierarchies, the neglect of rural areas in terms of physical space, and bureaucratic controls over welfare services collectively create a stifling environment. Galtung (1969) contended that structural violence is a slow killer. This ethnography demonstrates that intersectional, structural oppression diminishes and renders lives unthinkable, never considering them worthy of being saved.

Violence as Composition:

Throughout this fieldwork, it became evident that violence is not a singular occurrence but rather a complex amalgamation. This complex process is built up incrementally, with each small action contributing to the larger whole: who holds the power to speak, who is denied a voice, who roams freely, who requires permission to move, who pursues a higher education and who is expected to leave it behind. This occurrence is not a coincidence. The daily process of belonging and exclusion is carried out by the state, society, and often tragically by the family, sometimes intentionally and sometimes in the form of inherited attitudes. The effect remains the same nonetheless.

I prefer not to sentimentalize hardship or sanctify aggression. The goal is to break down the distinction between "peace" and "violence." What we define as peace may actually be a deeply ingrained system of coercion and suppression – a phenomenon referred to by Ruth Wilson Gilmore as organised abandonment. This insidious, ongoing form of violence is more deadly than the overt kind because it often goes unacknowledged as violence.

The architecture of state welfare, particularly public health, is frequently portrayed as the pinnacle of democratic generosity. Government-subsidized treatment, complimentary blood banks, and health cards are highlighted as indicators of a "pro-people" state. Even when they are physically accessible, colleges and universities can

serve as places of estrangement. Microaggressions including skewed curricular narratives and discriminatory treatment by classmates and instructors are commonplace among Muslim girls attending mixed-race schools. Cycles of restricted socioeconomic mobility are reinforced by these experiences, which also discourage involvement in higher education and lead to high dropout rates. My field observations among Muslim women in West Bengal — widows, single mothers, working-class families — showed the exact opposite: a theatre of inclusion concealing a politics of disposability.

One incident dispelled the notion of kindness. In Kolkata, a Muslim widow, who was caring for a daughter with schizophrenia and a son receiving dialysis, possessed a government health card. Her everyday experience was characterised by subtle and repeated denials. The issue was not the lack of resources — the hospital had blood, beds, and doctors. These were rapidly activated, but only for the politically visible or economically empowered individuals.

This selective functioning reveals a discretionary behaviour: institutions that operate with efficiency for some individuals while condemning others to a slow death. These events were not technical malfunctions but rather instances of harassment, delayed transfusions, and bureaucratic rerouting. They were the exact design of the system, calibrated to exhaust the marginal. Even in a supposedly neutral and apolitical health system, which is expected to be guided by science, violence still exists. The indignity of being denied basic services is compounded by the humiliation of having to beg for them, the emotional burden of pleading in public, and the public display of one's powerlessness. The hospital's layout — queues, files, wards, counters, the lack of mechanisms for addressing grievances — embodies social exclusion based on caste, class, and community in both physical and operational terms.

> *"I had the card. The government said it would cover the cost. But at the hospital, they sent me to one window, then another. My son was losing breath. I kept asking. They kept telling me to wait. They asked me to find blood donors myself. Where do I go? Who do I ask? I am a widow. My daughter has schizophrenia. My son was all I had." (Jahanara 48, Metiabruz)*

This narrative serves as an indictment rather than an exception. The promise of inclusion through welfare provisions like health cards fails to materialize for many women, including Jahanara, at the point of delivery. The state is present in policy but absent in practice, implementing structural violence as defined by Johan Galtung, which comprises systemic arrangements that inflict preventable suffering while disguising themselves as neutral.

Jahanara's story vividly illustrates this. A widowed Muslim woman, who was already the primary caregiver to her daughter suffering from schizophrenia, was suddenly faced with the impending loss of her son—diagnosed with kidney failure, undergoing dialysis, and struggling with severe pulmonary complications. She was compelled to repeatedly visit different departments despite having a state-issued health card, in order to obtain even the most fundamental forms of care, such as life-saving blood transfusions. Field observations showed that hospital workflows frequently gave priority to patients with scheduled appointments, leading to inconsistent waiting times and varying levels of accessible care. The widow regularly navigated between different counters, floors, and departments, coordinating various tests, medications, and consultations while attempting to support her son. Caregivers and patients faced an increased burden due to logistical and procedural challenges, especially those with limited mobility or resources.

The widow's experience illustrates a wider trend: the availability of healthcare was influenced by underlying structural and procedural elements, such as distance, appointment scheduling, and bureaucratic demands. Women from low-income households were particularly impacted, as illness overlapped with domestic duties, mobility issues, and restricted social networks.

From an ethnographic perspective, the pandemic revealed how violence is not always spectacular or visible, but slowly sedimented into the fabric of everyday life (Das, 2007). Hunger, loss of jobs, and the pressures of sustaining households are not conventionally framed as “violence,” yet for those living through them, they were deeply violent in their consequences. A mother skipping meals so her children could eat, a father sinking into despair because his degree no longer secured a livelihood, or a young girl’s education being weighed against her dowry—all these fragments show how violence accumulates quietly, leaving scars that are neither acknowledged nor counted in official registers.

This situation can be viewed as the collapse of a "broken system". Systems, especially public healthcare in India, are functioning exactly as intended – by giving precedence to some lives while exhausting others. The selective efficiency of care is starkly evident when influential individuals, politicians, or government officials require medical attention: doctors are available promptly, beds are arranged quickly, and procedures are expedited. The hospital that left a widowed woman waiting for hours and begging for attention is capable of performing efficiently, just not in her case.

This violence is not dramatic or intense. Like sediment settling silently at the bottom of a glass of water, it is sedimented, normalized, and routinized. For women like Jahanara, the burden is always evident, endured in everyday indignities and institutionalised rejection. Jahanara's marginalization is the result of a series of interconnected factors. Her gender, socioeconomic status, religious identity, widowhood, and caregiving responsibilities intersect to increase her susceptibility. She is not just being ignored; she is being made invisible. Her son's decline was also influenced not just by his illness but by a general institutional lack of concern that devalued his life. His death was not predetermined by biology, but was instead brought about by social factors, including denial, delay, and a lack of concern.

This also undermines the notion of "secular" public infrastructure. Hospitals operated by the government are not secular environments. Muslim bodies, especially those of impoverished Muslim women, are often perceived as unworthy, requiring special treatment, or somehow less valuable within larger societal frameworks of perception. What is being denied is not just access to infrastructure, but access to dignity, a sense of urgency, and basic humanity. As I stood beside Jahanara that afternoon, it became clear that my position in the field was not one of neutrality. I was not external to her experience but embedded within it, influenced by intersecting histories and identities. Recognizing this does not reduce research to individual stories, but rather acknowledges that the field is not merely theoretical: it is populated, physically experienced, and involves power dynamics. Her grief defied quantification, and my observations transcended mere notation. My position, by necessity, is one of situated solidarity rather than assumed objectivity.

Describing this as a failure of governance underestimates the situation. A calibrated system of selective care has emerged, characterised by budgetary provisions existing

but a lack of empathy; health is conceptualised as a right but treated as a privilege; as a result, women like Jahanara are left to suffer quiet deaths, their losses either absorbed into statistics or lost amidst bureaucratic silence. This is purely a matter of circumstance rather than anecdotal evidence. Evidence shows that violence functions not through overt force, but through the mundane aspects of waiting rooms and the everyday mechanisms of exclusion.

Everyday Microaggressions and the Reinforcement of Inferiority: The prevalence of microaggressions—subtle, indirect, and frequently undetected forms of prejudice—contributes to this internalization in addition to overt acts of discrimination. Muslim women are often subjected to discrimination, excluded from decision-making forums, and required to demonstrate their value in academic and professional contexts. These minuscule but continuous encounters form a worldview that normalizes inadequacy, reinforcing cycles of marginalization. Furthermore, a sense of helplessness is strengthened by frequent exposure to patronizing behaviour, such as being disregarded in professional settings or spoken down to by authority.

Concentrating in economically disadvantaged areas, Muslim families are often denied access to quality education and legitimate employment opportunities. Women who mentioned their home address were often immediately rejected by recruiters, which supports the notion that poverty and one's religious background are both key determinants of exclusion. Many women reported that job recruiters dismissed them outright when they mentioned their residential address, reinforcing the idea that poverty and religious identity function as intersecting factors in being denied opportunities. According to Ahmed (2024), the power and perceived legitimacy of hate speech and injurious acts, including acts like refusing to touch, are sourced from prevailing social norms, ritualised memories, and the embodied experience of abjection. Ray (2019: 148) demonstrates this point by focusing on the cases of Dalit women, who, despite gaining higher-level jobs through affirmative action policies, frequently encounter negative reactions. These policies confront entrenched systems of elitism that aim to maintain social hierarchies, sparking reactions that attempt to preserve current exclusions and strengthen systemic marginalisation. The dynamic in question is also apparent in the research conducted among Muslim women in Bengal, where analogous social exclusion and marginalisation processes unfold, even in the presence of policy interventions or access to opportunities.

Women internalize the idea that their opinions are not as important in institutional and public contexts, which discourages them from actively participating even more. Many feel disenchanted with institutions that have traditionally disregarded their concerns, which has long-term effects on their involvement in civic and political life.

Fear and Silence as Tools of Oppression:

The key factor maintaining this internalized oppression is the fear of expressing dissenting opinions. Fear of social exclusion, financial consequences, or institutional retaliation often prevents many marginalized women from confronting oppressive systems. The enforced silence enables systemic harm to continue unchecked, as those who might object internalise the hopelessness or risk of opposing it. The normalization of fear creates a status quo by making structural oppression seem irreversible.

This fear is not unfounded but has its roots in lived experience. Individuals who seek to alter their situations frequently encounter backlash, which can manifest as economic repercussions, social ostracism, or even physical intimidation. The lack of robust legal safeguards against discrimination and gender-based violence intensifies this anxiety, rendering many without any feasible routes for resistance. As time passes, it results in a deep-seated feeling of resignation, with accepting exclusion becoming a means of survival.

Institutional discrimination and the fear of harassment severely limit the freedom of movement for Muslim women in public spaces. Numerous individuals expressed hesitation to travel beyond their local neighbourhoods because they felt watched and mistrusted in public areas. Their fear, stemming from firsthand experiences of prejudice, effectively restricts them to specific localities, thus intensifying their social and economic disconnection. This fear, rooted in lived experiences of discrimination, effectively confines them to particular zones, exacerbating their social and economic isolation.

The research indicates that state institutions contribute to this exclusion by implementing policies which neglect to address the underlying structural disadvantages faced by Muslim women. Institutional policies perpetuate existing socio-economic disparities through a lack of legal safeguards against religious discrimination in the workplace and by consistently overlooking the needs of Muslim-majority areas in urban

development strategies. From the absence of legal protections against religious discrimination in employment to the systemic neglect of Muslim-majority localities in urban planning, institutional policies reinforce existing socio-economic hierarchies.

These results demonstrate that intersectional marginalization is not a random or isolated issue but rather a deeply ingrained societal reality. Physical harm constitutes only a part of violence, as violence is a continuous process that excludes individuals, limiting their opportunities and stifling the voices of marginalised groups. The cumulative effect involves internalising subordination and the acceptance of exclusion as the norm.

The long-term consequences of intersectional marginalization go beyond the immediate economic and social isolation. The most alarming outcome of this research is the adoption of subservience. Following repeated rejections and exclusions, many women came to accept their secondary position with a sense of resignation. This process is demonstrated in a variety of forms. Internalization of societal narratives led many women to doubt their abilities, thereby lowering their aspirations for certain careers or academic pursuits. This trend was most apparent among young women who had experienced educational exclusion and workplace prejudice. This phenomenon was particularly evident among younger women who had faced educational exclusion and workplace discrimination.

Fear of repercussions led several participants to refrain from speaking out against injustice. Some had witnessed others being punished—whether by losing their jobs, facing enhanced monitoring, or being shunned by their community—when they tried to contest unjust systems. The resulting silence stemming from fear enables exclusion to go largely unchecked. This fear-induced silence ensures that exclusion remains largely unchallenged.

Repeated marginalization takes a significant mental health toll, resulting from ongoing exposure to microaggressions, discriminatory treatment, and social exclusion, which can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness in individuals. This psychological strain frequently goes unconsidered in policy debates, but it is crucial for perpetuating systemic harm by suppressing collective defiance. This psychological burden is often overlooked in policy discussions, yet it plays a critical role in sustaining structural violence by discouraging collective resistance.

The research indicates that intersectional oppression has cumulative effects, leading to a situation where Muslim women are not only disadvantaged but also have their ability to make choices and achieve social advancement significantly limited.

Community Engagement, Communication, and Emotional Health:

In addition to mere survival and coping, numerous women actively maintain the social structure of their communities. Engaging in community service, whether through participating in literacy programs at madrasas, helping at health camps, or aiding widows and orphans, transforms personal vulnerability into concern for others. This type of work not only increases women's visibility in the public domain but also confirms their position as moral and social stabilizing agents within their community.

Dialogue practices across community boundaries are equally significant. Women deliberately encourage cooperation between different community groups, whether through joint school committees, neighborhood mediation, or informal sharing of resources. These initiatives help counter distrust and animosity, especially in regions affected by communal tensions.

Mental health, frequently subject to stigma, is expressed in various settings, including both religious and community environments. Women articulate their anxieties, stress, and despair through expressions of faith, prayer, or healing rituals, as well as terms such as “tension,” “stress,” or “depression.” These expressions create a space for discussing emotional well-being without necessarily framing it as a medical issue. In this context, religion serves as a source of comfort and a platform that enables conversations about inner turmoil, frequently prompting younger women to discuss their concerns with peers or older individuals.

Appadurai (2004: 64) contends that in a democracy, a community's voice gains political recognition only when it acquires the capacity to be heard. Communities achieve this capacity when they gain the power to set goals, allowing them to pursue visibility through self-directed action. Demanding recognition and rights relies on this foundational capability. This capacity to aspire and speak is usually not granted automatically. Couldry (2010:117) further argues that community voices are frequently deliberately suppressed or misrepresented by authorities—in political institutions, the media, or even within marginalised groups by dominant actors themselves. These

structural barriers collectively restrict meaningful involvement in public discourse, thereby perpetuating marginalisation. According to Sen (1999: 156), the inclusion of voices in formal channels does not automatically guarantee genuine recognition, as they may be ignored, dismissed, or misunderstood.

The interconnected processes of aspiration, structural denial, and misrecognition give rise to an environment in which marginalised communities are relegated to a state of social invisibility. Within this context, the concept of Accumulative Invisible Violence (AIV) is critical, as it reveals how systematic exclusions accumulate over time, shaping the lived experiences of those affected. These practices collectively show that coping is not merely a defensive mechanism but also involves innovative and proactive strategies. Women create new paths of unity, validation, and recovery, resisting being overlooked not only by enduring, but also by claiming their place and fostering resilience that benefits both themselves and their wider communities.

Accumulative Invisible Violence: Towards a New Conceptual Framework

In my prolonged ethnographic fieldwork across select districts of West Bengal, the women I interacted and documented, rarely described their lives in terms of a singular traumatic event. One woman put it succinctly: *"It is not one wound, not one harm, but those many small cuts that make life bleed."* These voices convey a deeply impactful form of harm that is not sensational but significant nonetheless. Drawing upon these lived experiences and the textures of daily life, I conceptualize Accumulative Invisible Violence (AIV) as a lens that builds on sensitizing concepts such as structural violence, intersectionality, discrimination, and lived experience.

Defining Accumulative Invisible Violence:

> *"A process in which small acts of harm—such as neglect, community policing, and anticipatory silences—accumulate invisibly over time. This sedimentation, in a way produces chronic marginalization, and conditional belonging, at a multi-scalar level- individual, community, and institutional. These acts may not appear violent in isolation, but together they curtail the voice, agency, and material security of the affected individuals."*

Accumulative Invisible Violence is characterized by its slow and non-dramatic nature, occurring without major incidents or officially acknowledged transgressions. Repeated experiences of bureaucratic neglect and community surveillance contribute to the emergence of anticipatory self-regulation. It manifests in silences, pauses, and constrained behaviours, operating at both personal and structural levels. The term "invisible" highlights how these harms are omitted from dominant definitions of violence, despite having profound material and emotional consequences. Seemingly insignificant on their own, these negative effects—indifference from bureaucracy, gossip, moral supervision, and anticipating silence—collectively build up, impacting lives characterised by exclusion, limitation, and instability, and making restricted possibilities seem ordinary.

AIV does not supersede existing frameworks like structural violence or institutional discrimination, but rather builds upon them by highlighting four interconnected dimensions: institutional neglect, socio-cultural marginalization, spatial/temporal confinement, and internalized expectation. These dimensions collectively shed light on how violence influences and limits the everyday tactics employed for survival.

The Four Dimension of AIV:

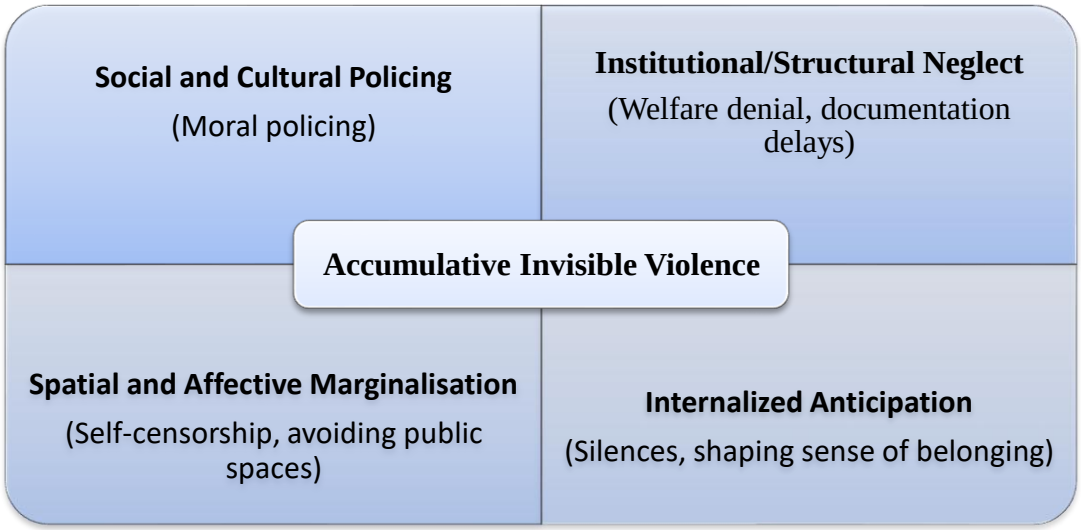

Figure 5.1: AIV Conceptual Schema Diagram by the researcher (2025)

(i) Institutional and Structural Neglect:

It involves the systematic methods by which state institutions and bureaucratic processes create exclusion while simultaneously concealing their own involvement. Akhil Gupta (2012) posits that the state causes death through inaction: by not intervening, failing to offer assistance, or creating complex procedures that effectively bar those who need it most from accessing it. In the field, Muslim women frequently came up against bureaucratic obstacles, including ration cards that were absent from lists, failures in welfare schemes linked to Aadhaar, threats from NRC verification, or police indifference in domestic violence cases. These denials were rarely spectacular. More specifically, they were dealt with in the mundane language of protocol: “Your form is incomplete,” “The server is experiencing technical difficulties,” “Please return next month.” These everyday bureaucratic obstacles typically do not capture the attention of the news media, but their collective influence on individuals who are already struggling can be extremely destructive. It's the ordinary nature and acceptance of institutional neglect in AIV that sets it apart. Neither officials nor communities classify it as "violence." For women reliant on subsidised rations, losing a month's entitlement amounts to more than just an inconvenience – it is a state of hunger. For young girls aiming to continue their education, delayed payment of scholarships often results in leaving school and marrying early. For women left without pensions, disregard becomes the silent theft of survival. Disregard, in this context, is not mere ineptitude but an unseen sorting process that accumulates over time, resulting in epistemic erasure—Muslim women rendered unworthy of recognition as legitimate citizens. Institutional neglect in AIV is an ongoing pattern of denial, involving the denial of welfare in the present, the erasure of past neglect from memory, and the creation of circumstances that will lead to future exclusions.

(ii) Socio-Cultural Marginalization and Religious Policing:

This dimension draws attention to the cultural control exerted on Muslim women by both external factors like Islamophobia and stereotyping, and internalised patriarchal control within their own communities, where women's clothing, movement, and choices are heavily restricted. Restricting education and other protective measures framed as "modesty" or safeguards frequently deprive women of personal autonomy.

Bano's education in Metiabruz was curtailed by her family under the pretence of protection, stifling her ambitions. These practices resonate with Foucault's idea of disciplinary power, in which violence is concealed by being misrepresented as care. For many women, adherence to religious customs offers a sense of security, belonging, and moral value, while also limiting their independence. External Islamophobic pressures perpetuate internal patriarchal controls, situating women as both symbolic representatives of community identity and subjects of restriction.

(iii) Spatial and Temporal Marginalization:

A key aspect of the concept of accumulative invisible violence is the limitations placed on space and time. This form of harm manifests through the organisation of everyday life in a way that is often routine, mundane and overlooked, yet it leads to significant long-term disadvantages. Women's life choices are often restricted by a combination of restrictions rather than a single ban; instead, they are gradually limited by geographical and time-based constraints. For instance, education can be disrupted not by outright disapproval but by schools located far away, unsecure transportation options, or societal norms that discourage travel. Rida's situation exemplifies this: initially supported by her parents, she was eventually prevented from pursuing education by relatives and neighbours who raised concerns about her safety or hinted that education made girls over-reliant on themselves. Individually, each restriction may appear minor or acceptable, but collectively they constitute a formidable network of regulation. Institutional voids, societal disapproval of publicly visible actions, and community monitoring enforcing moral codes are all contributing factors to spatial constraints. Life-cycle expectations govern the operation of temporal constraints: education must conclude by a specific age, marriage should not be postponed, and mobility is limited to designated hours. These constraints are also influenced by intersectional factors such as gender, religion, and class. Wealthier women may avoid certain obstacles with private transportation or private education, whereas poorer or Pasmanda women encounter intensified limitations in remote locations. These limitations are not just obstacles; they accumulate over time, leading to structural delays such as delayed education, postponed healthcare, and restricted employment, ultimately resulting in systemic exclusion. Decisions that seem protective, cautious, or reasonable when made repeatedly across households and generations ultimately solidify into a pattern of

collective marginalization. Spatial-temporal marginalization serves as an example of AIV, characterised by violence that is not visibly attributed to a perpetrator, but is instead embedded in the everyday routines of life. Women face a double-edged situation in which protective social norms safeguard them from potential harm, but also restrict their freedom of action and future opportunities. This axis illustrates how cumulative hidden aggression functions not only through institutions or interpersonal actions, but through the actual structure of social life across space and time, resulting in long-lasting and frequently unacknowledged damage.

(iv) Internalized Anticipation: The most insidious aspect of accumulative invisible violence is how it becomes internalised. Women are taught not only to adapt to external limitations but also to foresee them, controlling their own speech, movement, and even creative thinking before any actual obstruction takes place. Anticipatory self-regulation is not merely a defensive response; over time, it transforms the way individuals experience subjectivity, fostering a culture of caution, silence, and self-restraint as a regular aspect of daily life. In Hooghly, a woman poignantly described the experience saying: “What shatters us isn't always the violence—it's the silence that follows.” Her words suggest a complex level of hurt. The initial instance of exclusion or reprimand is only one aspect of the experience. What persists and continues to accumulate is the silence that follows, which forecloses possibilities and narrows the horizon of thought. Silence functions as both a means of self-preservation and a limiting force, serving a dual purpose of both protection and suffocation. Women adjust their daily routines—deciding when to leave, how to dress, how to speak, or which benefits to pursue—based on their internal understanding of potential shame or being monitored. By taking these actions, they not only address external demands but also mitigate potential criticism, incorporating anticipated disapproval into their decisions. Over time, this results in a habitual caution, a type of living that is constantly guarded by fear and self-surveillance. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, in which long-lasting dispositions shape action in a manner that perpetuates inequality without necessitating direct intervention.

In this context, however, it is not simply a matter of classed or gendered habitus—it is intensified through religious and communal monitoring, where women are doubly distinguished by their Muslim identity and womanhood. Spivak's concept of epistemic violence is illuminating: when women internalize silence, they are not only deprived of

the ability to speak, but also of the capacity to envision themselves as fully legitimate experts or participants in the public domain. What stands out, nonetheless, is not merely the existence of restraint but its buildup and entrenched nature. Every small moment of hesitation, every unmet goal, and every unexpressed thought contributes to a store of internalised suffering. Over time, this leads to a disruption of life's equilibrium—not as a dramatic break, but as a gradual reduction in possibilities. Exclusion and discipline become routine for women, making the violence that accompanies them appear ordinary and almost imperceptible. Internalized anticipation does not involve a passive acceptance of oppression. This involves navigating and finding ways to thrive within strict frameworks.

The strategies that allow for survival also perpetuate marginalization. At the core of accumulative invisible violence resides a paradox: women modify their behavior in an effort to endure, yet by doing so, they also bear and perpetuate the very limitations that suppress them. These dimensions do not function in isolation; instead, they mutually reinforce one another in ways that make violence both imperceptible and tangible. When a female internalizes community policing as a means of protection, she may also concur with limitations on her freedom of movement. When bureaucratic neglect causes a widow's pension to be delayed, the cumulative experience of humiliation begins to affect her sense of identity, influencing what she dares to hope for.

The conceptual shift here is distinct yet substantial: AIV portrays violence not as a singular incident confined to a specific time, nor merely as an externally imposed framework, but rather as an experiential accumulation that settles into the body, mind, and scope of potentiality. It offers a means of identifying the commonplace, pervasive violence that is ubiquitous yet inconspicuous, visible only upon close examination of the detailed accounts of everyday experiences. AIV reveals how harm insidiously permeates daily life, influencing the spheres in which women operate, their destinations, and the aspirations they dare to harbour. The reshaping of families, communities, and institutions occurs through a gradual process that involves bureaucratic neglect, community policing, and self-imposed limitations over extended periods of time. The AIV Toolkit offers a method for identifying these unseen aggressions, making the everyday injuries apparent, and assigning them both analytical and practical significance.

Analytical toolkit:

Invisible violence often goes undetected, differing from the sudden, visible atrocities of mob attacks, sexual assault, or police brutality, as it conceals itself within mundane paperwork, enforced silences, ordinary routines, and unfulfilling phrases. The potential risks are evident to anyone attempting to study it, including researchers, policymakers, and activists. This harm is often disregarded as insignificant, "cultural," or merely a normal part of life. The concept of over-generalization is often explained in a vague manner, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding its actual mechanisms.

The AIV Toolkit provides a means of navigating this subtle violence. The tool offers questions, and guidelines, which helps in identifying the unseen visible, without simplifying the actual experiences of those who encounter it. This method involves tracking and analysing everyday forms of harm that are minor, frequent, and cumulative, and how these quiet forms of violence impact lives, opportunities, and potential futures.

Scholars and analysts need a systematic method to identify patterns of harm in people's daily lives in order to operationalize AIV.

Identify Recurrent Exclusion: The cumulative harm is produced by mapping bureaucratic procedures, social practices, and spatial limitations.

a. Which administrative processes systematically exclude Muslim women?

b. What factors contribute to the cumulative effect of "delays," "incomplete documents," or "procedural errors"?

c. What forms of state neglect are institutionalized as governance, yet perpetuate long-term suffering through the absence of essential services and infrastructure?

Socio-Cultural Marginalization and Policing:

a. At what point does the concept of "protection" transition into a restriction of autonomy?

b. In what ways do women perceive religious and cultural norms as simultaneously conferring dignity and imposing constraints?

c. How do external discrimination and internal patriarchal control interact to heighten exclusion?

Internalized Anticipation:

a. In daily life, how do women prepare for and modify their actions to avoid harm?

b. How does silence serve both as protection and as a way of enforcing compliance?

c. In what ways do women's aspirations, objectives, and prospects get shaped or constrained by this expectation?

The AIV Toolkit centres on repetitive patterns and the process of accumulation to expose how harm becomes ingrained and systemic. Repeated instances of welfare denial across different families, years, and geographical areas can be seen as evidence of a systematic exclusion process. Small, normalized harms such as missed education, restricted mobility, and moral policing accumulate over time to form chronic disadvantage. These harms accumulate over time, affecting not only women's material circumstances but also their sense of self-worth, potential, and a sense of belonging. The toolkit's objective is not to record dramatic events, but to chart the subtle, imperceptible structure of daily harm.

Methodological Implications:

Conceptualising Developing Accumulative Invisible Violence (AIV) has significant methodological implications. When violence is gradual, embedded, and widespread, the methods used in fieldwork need to change in order to identify and document the often understated, unheard, or overlooked aspects of everyday life that are frequently associated with "ordinary" occurrences. I outline below the methodological implications that follow from utilising this conceptual lens.

Attentiveness to Silences and Pauses: In conventional ethnography, silences are often viewed as gaps that need to be filled – instances where the person being questioned remains silent or where the researcher must ask more questions. Veena Das (2007) argues that silences are not mere absences but the very texture through which violence enters everyday life. Similarly, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) shows how silences shape history just as much as speech does. In an AIV framework, however, silences are

treated as data. They register the weight of unimaginable experience, the costs of identifying violence, and the methods of self-protection in hostile settings. In Hooghly, women would occasionally fall silent when discussing discrimination in schools or ration queues, uttering the phrase "chhoro na" ("let it be"). These pauses can be seen as performances of containment, acting as a means of deflecting the emotional and social consequences of sharing stories of trauma. The ethnographer's role here is to immerse themselves in the silence and inquire: what does this refusal itself disclose about the cumulative weight of being rendered vulnerable?

Tracing Repetition and Micro-Patterns: Most accounts of violence focus on isolated, dramatic incidents. The researcher should track what may initially seem mundane and repetitive. Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1977) sheds light on how repetition legitimates unjust social systems. Johan Galtung's (1969) concept of "structural violence" illustrates how routine exclusions often go unnoticed.

The ethnographic eye must transition from singular events to ongoing patterns. In Bankura, one might dismiss a woman's account of being denied a widow pension as a mere bureaucratic error. The repetition of a pattern across multiple households, districts, and years suggests a structural design rather than a random occurrence. This entails methodologically collecting fragments, maintaining long-term records of minor complaints, and examining how these accumulate into a pattern of unseen harm.

Layered Contextual Reading: According to Akhil Gupta (2012), the concept of "red tape" underscores the intersection of bureaucracy, poverty, and governance in the creation of exclusionary circumstances, whereas Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) idea of intersectionality elucidates how the convergence of gender, religion, class, and caste collectively influences and perpetuates marginalization.

Due to AIV unfolding across multiple axes, including state neglect, socio-cultural marginalization, spatial restriction, and internal anticipation, the method is unable to isolate incidents from their broader context. A fieldworker needs to adopt a practice of contextual layering, where each micro-event is placed within intersecting frameworks of governance, religious authority, community standards, and gender-specific conventions. In this instance, a girl prevented from travelling to a coaching centre is not simply experiencing familial restriction. Her inability to move freely is also linked

to inadequate transport infrastructure, community gossip about women's behavior, Islamophobic monitoring of Muslim communities, and her own cautious nature. This involves methodologically treating each "event" within a web of structural, cultural, and temporal conditions.

Reading Anticipation as Practice: According to Sara Ahmed (2010), fear influences future actions, and Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of "slow death" describes how life is often centred around mere survival rather than severe injury. When women said, "I don't go to the clinic at night, you never know what people will say," they were not referring to actual incidents, but a lived experience coloured by anticipated hostility. Every decision becomes a considered choice due to the reorganisation of time, mobility, and personal identity.

Ethnographers need to change their approach: they should consider counterfactuals, hesitations, and imagined futures as essential components of everyday life, rather than mere speculation, and instead view them as tangible signs of how violence is anticipated.

Ethnographer's Positional Reflexivity: Abu-Lughod (1991) highlights the significance of countering "cultural generalization" and demonstrates how an ethnographer's positionality influences the knowledge they generate. Das & Poole (2004) suggest that state power is most effectively understood by examining its outer edges, where its influence is most pronounced.

Through my fieldwork, I frequently came to understand later that exclusion was embedded in subtle nonverbal cues, such as being seated in courtyards rather than drawing rooms, delayed introductions, or uncertain glances. My position, as a Muslim woman and a researcher, bridged both insider and outsider perspectives, thereby increasing my awareness of these small yet crucial indicators of marginalization. This experience brought about a fundamental methodological change, wherein reflexivity is integral rather than supplementary, and crucial for acknowledging what is otherwise taken for granted and invisible. The issue of harm became a key focus in understanding its gradual build-up in ordinary life.

Longitudinal and multi-site approaches: The AIV approach is informed by Michael Burawoy's "extended case method," which links micro-level interactions to larger

societal processes, and Clifford Geertz's (1973) call for rich, detailed descriptions that place individual narratives within broader contexts, as initially proposed in "extended case method" (1998). Studying Bankura, Hooghly, and Metiabruz collectively revealed that bureaucratic neglect, community policing, and gender restrictions were not singular events but components of a pattern of cumulative harm. AIV requires a change in methodology towards long-term fieldwork at multiple sites, where disjointed experiences are tracked and connected over time and location, showing how harm gradually builds up and becomes entrenched.

Conceptualizing AIV: Comparative and Cross-Contextual Dimensions:

Every conceptual innovation risk being parochial, unless they are deliberately integrated into the broader discussions of the academic community. A key strength of Accumulative Invisible Violence (AIV) resides in its capacity to transcend local experiences and participate in more extensive scholarly discussions. AIV does not merely highlight the vulnerability of Muslim women in Bengal; it provides a conceptual framework intended to travel, resonate, and make a significant contribution to global comprehension of structural harm, inequality, and marginalisation. By anchoring AIV's affinities in comparative scholarly work, thus demonstrating its ability to show how minor, unnoticeable wrongs accumulate in various situations.

The experience of exclusion based on caste in India serves as a significant comparative reference point. Scholars like B.R. Ambedkar and Sharmila Rege have demonstrated that caste oppression is carried out not only through overt, dramatic acts of violence but also through routine degradations, including being denied access to basic necessities such as water, being segregated in public areas, and being excluded from social benefits. This analysis is further developed by AIV, which concentrates on the gradual buildup of these minor harms over time. A single denial of access to an Anganwadi, although seemingly accidental, can accumulate over generations into chronic obstacles that significantly impact an individual's life prospects. Furthermore, AIV demonstrates how anticipating exclusion can fundamentally alter a person's worldview, reducing their options, encouraging silence, and limiting their mobility. This approach enhances caste analysis by linking material exclusions to the emotional and temporal aspects of harm. AIV's strength lies in its capacity to demonstrate that these harms are interconnected, forming a gradual and complex structure of marginalization.

The systemic exclusion faced by African American communities in the United States mirrors a global phenomenon outside of South Asia. Researchers like Khalil Gibran Muhammad and Dorothy Roberts have documented the structural harm faced by racialized communities, which occurs not only through dramatic incidents such as police brutality but also through ongoing administrative denials, including delayed insurance payments, increased policing, and insufficiently funded schools.

It offers a unique perspective by revealing how such exclusions gradually build up over time, resulting in the development of everyday survival strategies. A mother's concern that her son may encounter police harassment prompts her to carefully control his movements, maintain secrecy, or steer clear of specific public areas. This anticipatory logic embodies the fundamental aspect of AIV, where spectacular violence and routine neglect are intertwined as components of a singular, cumulative framework of harm. When our focus moves from racial to migratory situations, the same principle of accumulation remains relevant, albeit varying methods.

Research on migrant and refugee women in Europe, including Aihwa Ong's study on "flexible citizenship" and Bridget Anderson's work on "migrant illegality," illustrates how exclusion is inherent in administrative systems—visa renewals, welfare limitations, and healthcare obstacles.

AIV makes a contribution by highlighting the everyday experience of exclusion, exemplified by anticipatory fear ("Will my visa be denied?") and self-imposed restrictions (e.g. avoiding hospitals to prevent revealing undocumented status). AIV portrays vulnerability as a condition that develops incrementally over a period. Small, seemingly insignificant denials or delays, frequently downplayed as technical or isolated incidents, gradually build up to a lasting experience of unseen damage. This demonstrates that vulnerability is not solely enforced from the outside, but rather experienced, internalized, and perpetuated through routine acts of caution and restraint.

This emphasis on how harm accumulates over time enhances feminist comprehension of susceptibility. Judith Butler's concept of "precarious life" and Nancy Fraser's framework of recognition versus redistribution have both contributed to a deeper understanding of marginalization. Butler highlights the lives that are considered disposable, in contrast to Fraser's focus on structural misrecognition.

AIV expands on these findings by detailing the everyday, tangible mechanisms that lead to exclusion: prolonged bureaucratic inaction, community gossip, enforced silence. It is essential to note that AIV does not consider vulnerability an abstract or static concept, but rather demonstrates how it develops through minor acts of denial and anticipation. Based on extensive ethnographic research, AIV shows that these harms are not abstract ideas, but are instead deeply ingrained in the daily lives of women.

The experiences of Muslim women in Bengal illustrate with striking clarity that harm is rarely experienced in a single dimension. It emerges at the intersection of factors like gender, religion, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and educational background. Intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw (1989), continues to be crucial for understanding how various identities combine to create complex forms of inequality. However, when viewed through the prism of cumulative, imperceptible aggression, these interactions gain a temporal and process-oriented quality that conventional frameworks fail to fully encompass.

What my fieldwork uncovered, in contrast, is that these exclusions are not simply occurring together; they are cumulative. Every encounter with marginalization leaves behind a mark, however insignificant — a bureaucratic hold-up, a public embarrassment, a discreet warning to stay quiet. These traces do not disappear; they continue to accumulate, settling into the very fabric of daily life. Instead of viewing intersectionality as a static framework of disadvantage, AIV proposes that vulnerability is a dynamic process where cumulative harms accumulate and become more severe with the passage of time.

In addition to bureaucratic arbitrariness, another consideration is the selective distribution of welfare: as Gupta (2012) demonstrated in his study of everyday governance in India, welfare is often given out as if it were a personal preference rather than a guaranteed right. Initially, the theoretical framework for this research was based on structural violence (Galtung, 1969), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and the concepts of lived experience and discrimination, but the ethnographic results required a more extensive comparative discussion. Works such as Gupta's (2012) study on everyday bureaucracy and Das's (2007) reflections on harm in everyday life provided critical parallels in this second phase of analysis. Gupta illustrates the manner in which state practices function through discretionary exclusions, whereas Das shows how

violence permeates the everyday fabric of social life. Even in discussions with these frameworks, the ethnography continued to advocate for an additional step: to identify and conceptualize harm as a cumulative form of invisible violence (AIV). Systemic inequalities are revealed by structural violence, which exposes the arrangements that unfairly disadvantage certain groups; intersectionality underscores the coexistence of gender, religion, and class factors; meanwhile, everyday violence reveals the subtlety of harm in everyday interactions. AIV builds upon these concepts by illustrating how minor, often overlooked, injuries accumulate over time and eventually become deeply ingrained in daily life, appearing normal. What appears to be "ordinary difficulty" on the surface is actually the result of a lengthy process of quiet accumulation.

Therefore, AIV does not supersede the theories upon which it relies. Instead, it builds upon and improves them. This provides scholars with a perspective to view not only who is marginalised, but how marginalisation becomes institutionalised. Following the tracks of accumulation, we come to comprehend vulnerability not merely as an identity but as a lived and experienced passage of time — a gradual erosion of opportunities, aspirations, and the potential of life itself.

During my fieldwork, especially in the period coinciding with and immediately following the pandemic, what became evident was the fragile condition of everyday life among the Muslim community. The crisis was not necessarily marked by communal or religious divides in an overt sense, but by the sheer vulnerability of survival. The pandemic laid bare a reality that was already in motion—precarity, unemployment, and hunger (Das, 2020; Roy, 2021). Women and children were the worst affected, though men too suffered deeply. The sudden loss of employment for many men meant that the crisis of food, ration, and basic sustenance became the central concern of households.

In the absence of reliable external support, it was the community's own educated section that stepped forward. Small token funds were raised among themselves, and community kitchens were organized and run daily to ensure that no one went hungry. These initiatives, though limited in scale, illuminated the significance of education—not only as a marker of individual progress but also as a collective resource that could be mobilized in times of crisis. This also raises a wider question: if education has such potential for leadership and resilience, why is it still seen as secondary or even dispensable, especially in the case of women?

It was clear in the interactions that the issue was not a struggle between religion and modernity. Religion itself was never at stake. What was, however, under severe strain were the lives of the poor, the unemployed youth, and their families who found it increasingly impossible to place trust in the very systems that were supposed to protect and provide for them (Corbridge & Harriss, 2000). Several young men voiced disillusionment: “What will we do with this paper award, this degree, when there are no jobs?” one asked. “At the end, why do we study? To run our family? But if the cost of living is so high, education becomes a faraway luxury.” For parents, the dilemma was even sharper when it came to girls’ education: if thousands of rupees were spent on educating daughters, what savings would remain for marriage? The persistence of dowry-like expectations, even among educated families, meant that education was weighed against marriage prospects rather than seen as empowerment in itself (Jeffery & Jeffery, 2005).

This tension was articulated with painful clarity by another respondent who remarked, *‘moha sonket e ache amader chelera’*—our sons are in a grave crisis. The phrase captured both the despair of educated yet unemployed young men and the ripple effects their situation had on the entire community. Unemployment not only stripped men of income and social status but also eroded their mental health, which in turn shaped the lives of women around them (Han, 2012). Frustration, anxiety, and a sense of failure placed immense pressures on daughters and wives. For women, the situation became doubly burdensome. Already navigating marginalization on account of gender and community identity, they now found themselves caught between competing demands: the aspiration for education, the heavy weight of custom and marriage-related expectations, and the day-to-day struggle for survival (Kabeer, 2015). Education held out the promise of mobility, but it also carried the risk of being rendered meaningless when jobs were absent and patriarchal norms continued unabated. In this sense, women’s lives were stretched thin, negotiating between the symbolic value of education, the practical imperatives of family survival, and the ongoing reproduction of gendered restrictions. This dynamic echoed Panchali Ray (2019:139), that the women bodies are positioned at the periphery of the labour market. Though she highlighted that these women are not passive victims, where everyday symbolic and ‘ritualised violence’, sustains social and even marital expectations.

The pandemic, therefore, did not simply produce a temporary disruption—it revealed a deeper, accumulative crisis that was already structuring the everyday. Hunger, unemployment, mental distress, and dowry pressures are not isolated incidents but overlapping forms of vulnerability that weigh more heavily on Muslim women. This complex interplay demonstrates how socio-economic precarity is not separable from questions of education, gender, and community survival. A slow, persistent process where crises stack upon crises, producing forms of dispossession and marginalization that are difficult to capture through immediate or spectacular events.

Theoretically, AIV can be situated within broader conversations on structural and invisible violence. Johan Galtung's (1969) classic notion of structural violence highlights how social structures deprive people of their basic needs, while Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004) expand this by showing how such violence becomes normalized in everyday practices. My intervention builds on these insights but also departs from them by emphasizing the temporal and cumulative nature of violence. In the case of the Muslim community I studied, it is not a single act of exclusion that defines their marginality, but the layering of multiple insecurities: poverty, unemployment, dowry practices, lack of institutional trust, and the burden of gendered expectations. Each of these by itself may appear as hardship, but together they accumulate invisibly, wearing people down and limiting the horizons of what is possible.

For women, especially, this accumulative aspect is crucial. The pandemic did not only add a "new" crisis; it exacerbated existing forms of gendered inequality. Women carried the double weight of sustaining families in the absence of male incomes while also being made responsible for preserving custom, marriageability, and the symbolic honor of the household. Their marginalization cannot be reduced to a single axis of religion or gender—it is the compounding of both, reinforced by economic precarity, that illustrates how AIV operates in the everyday (Crenshaw, 1991; Mahmood, 2005).

Seen through the lens of AIV, the "Muslim women question" acquires a different meaning. Rather than reducing Muslim women's struggles to debates about religion, culture, or uniform civil codes, what comes into view is how layers of invisible violence—economic exclusion, unemployment, dowry pressures, educational insecurity, and gendered expectations—converge on their everyday lives. The crisis is

not that Muslim women need to be "saved" from religion, as dominant discourses often suggest (Abu-Lughod, 2002), but that they are compelled to negotiate survival within a terrain where multiple forms of marginalization accumulate simultaneously. Their double marginality—as women and as members of a stigmatized community—renders them especially vulnerable to these silent, compounding forms of violence. AIV therefore enables a re-framing of the Muslim women question: it is not merely a question of rights or representation, but of survival under conditions where violence is normalized, invisible, and endlessly reproduced.

At the same time, it would be misleading to suggest that women's struggles are only about unemployment or dowry pressures. The role of religion and religious authority also emerged as a significant force in shaping their lives. Many women I interacted with spoke of clerics or religiously influential figures who insisted on strict boundaries around women's conduct, mobility, and participation in the public sphere. Religion here acted as both refuge and constraint (Mahmood, 2005). On the one hand, faith offered comfort and a sense of belonging in times of distress. On the other, rigid interpretations placed severe restrictions on women, deepening their marginalization.

Yet it would also be inaccurate to reduce this condition simply to "religion." What intensified women's lack of agency was the absence of critical education and the weight of social conditioning, which made these religious constraints appear natural and unquestionable (Scott, 1990). Women's agendas—whether for education, work, or even dignity in everyday life—were easily eroded in this environment. The very foundations on which they might assert agency were fragile, uncertain, and often dependent on male relatives who themselves were struggling with unemployment and frustration.

The state, for its part, did extend forms of help during the pandemic, but these were often so bureaucratically complicated or narrowly targeted that they did little to alter lived realities (Chatterjee, 2004). For many families, such "aid" was symbolic at best, producing more distrust than relief. What remained decisive, therefore, was the mentality and perception within the community itself: rigid, at times orthodox, and deeply invested in keeping women within narrow definitions of honor and burden. Women were rarely imagined as contributors to household survival in ways that education or work could enable; instead, they were often treated as liabilities whose primary value lay in being contained, controlled, and eventually married off.

Even women themselves pointed out that in moments of extreme crisis, it was often not the state but community-led initiatives that reached them first. One such example, frequently mentioned in my fieldwork, was a NGO working for the betterment of muslim education in West Bengal—that, along with several other grassroots groups, came forward during the pandemic and even earlier during the devastation of cyclone Amphan. As women recounted, "Our houses were vanished, we were at the risk of dying. Even if we survived, there was nothing left." Many of these women worked as domestic workers in Kolkata or in semi-urban districts, and the collapse of both shelter and livelihood left them in near-total destitution. In their words: "We women are the ones who give birth, yet we ourselves cannot receive or give education to our next generation. Why? This poverty and its endless cycle never end. Even when we try, calamities take everything away. We are back to circle zero."

This articulation powerfully demonstrates how AIV operates: crises like pandemics and cyclones are not discrete ruptures but fold into an already precarious existence, resetting women to "circle zero." Yet despite such cycles, women also expressed a tenacious will to fight back. But their struggles are often met not with recognition, but with further violence. "Still we fight back and what happens—some are beaten to death. Why? Was it religion? Was it something else?" This question itself destabilizes simplistic explanations. Women were aware that religion was not the sole cause of their oppression; rather, it was its misinterpretation, its instrumentalization, and its entanglement with poverty and patriarchy that compounded their marginalization (Yuval-Davis, 1997). As one woman observed, "This is not the right education—be it modern or religious knowledge. They do not teach religion in the right way. It gets misguided at times."

Even when aspirations were aligned with modern education, the horizon seemed bleak. Women recounted how many youths dreamed only of securing corporate jobs, but as one interlocutor remarked, "Is it possible? Many have left homes for that, and now there isn't much in the field!" These reflections underline how both religious and modern educational pathways can appear fraught, unstable, and disconnected from the everyday realities of survival. What is lost in this process is not only faith in institutions but also a sense of grounded agency. "We are losing a lot at once—gradually and invisibly," as one woman put it, capturing in a single phrase the very logic of accumulative invisible violence.

This chapter has established AIV as a framework grounded in empirical evidence and a conceptual tool, by tracing its operation across institutional, socio-cultural, spatial, and anticipatory axes and demonstrating how these processes intersect with the complex identities of Muslim women in Bengal. What emerges is not only an account of harm that exceeds explanations based on individual incidents or legal definitions of violence, but also a way of seeing how marginalization over time accumulates and becomes perceived as ordinary and unavoidable.

The next step is to take a broader perspective and consider the overall impact of this framework: on academic research into violence, on discussions surrounding secularism and identity in India, and on feminist and intersectional approaches. The final chapter thus revisits the core questions of the thesis, integrates essential findings, and indicates possible avenues for future study and implementation.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The research raises a critical, thought-provoking question: What happens when ‘violence’ no longer appears as violence? What happens when it is deeply rooted in the mundane, everyday lives of people? It aimed to investigate understudied forms of violence that manifest in subtle, cumulative, and often imperceptible ways, rather than as overt acts of physical violence or legal discrimination. The research revealed that discrimination does not manifest through grand events alone but is woven into ordinary bureaucratic encounters, institutional structures, urban planning, economic hardship, and social hierarchies.

The lived experiences of Muslim women in West Bengal revealed that violence is not merely an act of force or a singular event, but rather a reality where exclusion is enforced through the gradual erosion of rights, dignity, and access to basic opportunities. This everyday composition of violence becomes normalized, unquestioned, and often invisible, both to those who endure it and to the broader structures that sustain it. As the research progressed, new patterns emerged from the field without dramatic pronouncements or media spectacle. Within this study’s framework, violence—typically understood as overt physical cruelty, combat, or destruction—appeared in far more subdued and pernicious forms.

Could this form of violence be more insidious and permanent than the overt forms widely conceptualised in mainstream discourse? The aim was not to compare which manifestation is more lethal, but to uncover the hidden layers beneath what is visible. It remained subtly present in ordinary life, functioning below the surface, inaudibly embedded in the social fabric and in the daily existence of those affected. The study thus became an act of understanding this dynamic: how violence is made ordinary and sustained, and how certain groups—like Muslim women—are rendered invisible within the social, political, and legal structures of the state.

This concluding chapter builds on these key findings, offering both a synthesis of core arguments and their broader implications. The chapter is structured as follows: the first

section revisits major themes emerging from the findings; the second discusses the theoretical implications of the research, showing how it extends or challenges existing conceptual frameworks; the third section presents specific interventions and policy recommendations for more inclusive and just practices. Finally, the chapter highlights the limitations of the study and calls for further attention to understudied areas.

A recurring pattern emerged from the findings: Muslim women were frequently led to believe that the limitations imposed on them were normal, unavoidable, or self-inflicted. This normalization resulted from subtle but enduring structural barriers, such as:

- Physical violence is not always apparent; it can be concealed and woven into everyday activities over time.
- Muslim women often internalised the idea that restrictions on their lives were typical, inescapable, or of their own making.
- Women empowerment does not alone dissolve patriarchy.
- Bureaucratic barriers to welfare programs (ration cards, Aadhaar, welfare benefits) perpetuate poverty and dependency, making individuals feel helpless rather than entitled.
- Invisible forms of violence occur without a discernible perpetrator, complicating identification and resistance.
- Housing discrimination confines Muslim families to underprivileged neighbourhoods, perpetuating spatial exclusion.
- Institutional bias in workplaces and schools restricts access to quality education and employment, framing poverty as individual failure rather than systemic oppression.
- Public areas and transportation remain inhospitable, pushing women to believe that staying home or traveling with male relatives is the only "safe" option.
- This form of structural violence is distinct in that it operates without an identifiable perpetrator, unlike direct state repression, which is more visible and condemned.
- Violence against Muslim women is neither rare nor coincidental but constitutes a deeply ingrained and systemic feature of their lives.

- The intersection of gender, religion, and socioeconomic status creates a unique form of marginalisation that requires multifaceted policy responses.
- The research stresses the need for intersectional methodologies that go beyond surface-level analysis, focusing instead on systemic structures of exclusion.

This research contributes to broader discussions on structural violence by demonstrating that meaningful social change requires dismantling interconnected networks of exclusion, not merely addressing individual manifestations of harm.

Theoretical Contributions – Bridging Galtung, Crenshaw, and Political Science Debates:

This research provides a significant contribution to the fields of politics, sociology, and feminist studies, offering a connection between the ideas of structural violence (Galtung), intersectionality (Crenshaw), and feminist ethnography. Based on direct interaction with Muslim women in West Bengal, the study moves beyond abstract theory to highlight the everyday experiences of exclusion that are frequently ignored in standard political discussions.

The study builds on existing research by combining these theoretical perspectives in three significant areas:

1. It illustrates how structural violence is present in everyday life, frequently going unrecognised outside legal and policy frameworks. These harms are embedded in routine practices, governmental policies, and organisational structures, quietly restricting access to resources, opportunities, and rights over time.

2. It refines the concept of intersectionality by situating it within the socio-political realities of South Asian Muslim women, showing how gender, religion, class, and geography interact in specific contexts to shape distinct experiences of marginalisation.

3. It challenges prevailing narratives that depict Muslim women solely as victims, emphasizing their agency and the strategies they employ to navigate and resist oppressive structures.

Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence provides an analytical framework for comprehending how entrenched systemic inequalities are incorporated into organisational structures, governmental policies, and routine practices. Structural violence differs from direct violence in that it is deeply ingrained within social, economic, and political systems. It does not necessarily manifest as overt legal bias but quietly diminishes access to opportunities, resources, and entitlements over time.

The research reveals the various manifestations of structural violence:

- Many Muslim women are excluded from job opportunities under the guise of "professionalism," with their hijab or cultural background perceived as a barrier to suitability.
- Limited access to quality education in Muslim-majority areas, combined with economic constraints, restricts educational mobility, perpetuating disadvantage across generations.
- Muslim women in marginalized urban areas are excluded from professional and social networks, limiting their access to opportunities despite the absence of formal legal barriers.
- Spatial segregation further contributes to a lack of economic and social mobility, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation.

A significant finding of the study is the concept of new conceptual framework, where repeated, everyday exclusions gradually increase in intensity, exacerbating the impact of structural violence. Rather than focusing solely on individual acts of discrimination, the research demonstrates how exclusion manifests as ordinary, repetitive, and profoundly hurtful experiences. Applying Galtung's framework to ethnographic narratives reveals that violence is not a singular event, but a pervasive condition internalized and perpetuated through everyday interactions, employment practices, educational inequality, and urban development policies.

This study, therefore, highlights the urgent need for an intersectional methodology that goes beyond surface-level analysis, focusing instead on the systemic structures that sustain marginalisation.

Moving Beyond Existing Literature: A Shift from Episodic to Accumulative Structural Violence:

This research builds upon existing discussions in political science, feminist theory, and intersectionality studies, introducing new theoretical frameworks that enhance our comprehension of systemic oppression. This study redefines structural violence by presenting it as a continuous accumulation of harm, rather than a sequence of isolated incidents. By introducing "invisible accumulative violence," this study reframes structural violence as an ongoing, layered process rather than a series of discrete acts.

This research provides first-hand ethnographic insights into how exclusion is experienced, embodied, and negotiated, in contrast to the secondary legal analysis often used in existing literature. While much of the existing literature relies on secondary legal analysis, this research brings first-hand, ethnographic accounts that reveal how exclusion is experienced, embodied, and negotiated.

This study applies the concept of intersectionality in a specific real-world setting, moving away from general theories and showing how factors such as gender, religion, social class, and spatial exclusion actually play out in daily life. This study operationalizes intersectionality within a specific socio-political context, moving beyond abstract discussions to demonstrate how gender, religion, class, and spatial marginalization function in everyday life. It shifts its focus from portraying Muslim women as helpless victims by instead highlighting the ways in which they resist and subvert their circumstances in quiet yet effective manners. Rather than portraying Muslim women as passive victims, this research foregrounds how they navigate and challenge their conditions in subtle yet powerful ways. This research integrates concepts of structural violence, intersectionality, and feminist ethnography, providing a complex yet empirically grounded analysis that sheds new light on the exclusion faced by Muslim women, allowing for a more detailed and layered understanding of their lives.

The results of this study highlight the pressing requirement for policy changes that extend beyond mere adherence to the law and tackle the underlying and commonplace forms of exclusion experienced by Muslim women. Institutions frequently have policies in place that lack effective implementation due to bureaucratic obstacles,

inherent prejudices, and the widespread acceptance of discriminatory practices. This section suggests practical, research-backed solutions based on ethnographic findings that can help close the divide between law, policy, and everyday life.

Each recommendation is associated with particular aspects of structural violence, intersectionality, and covert forms of community-based prejudice, as well as proposed metrics or indicators for gauging the effects.

1. Decentralizing Welfare Access – Reducing Bureaucratic Barriers

In disadvantaged regions, numerous Muslim women face significant challenges in obtaining benefits from welfare programs, largely due to cumbersome documentation procedures, insufficient awareness, and subtle prejudices among government officials who often control access. Mechanisms intended to help vulnerable groups are often instead used to exclude them.

Policy Proposal:

Streamline documentation procedures → Minimise reliance on strict ID verification processes that unfairly disadvantage women living in informal settlements or those without male caregivers.

Deploy mobile welfare teams to underserved communities to provide easier access to essential services rather than expecting individuals to traverse lengthy, uncooperative administrative systems. Training local women as intermediaries is aimed at helping others to access available benefits.

Assessment Indicators: A decrease in the number of applications rejected as a result of documentation problems. There has been a rise in welfare usage among Muslim women residing in both urban slums and rural regions. An analysis of women's opinions on their access to welfare services through surveys.

2. Address Educational Gatekeeping:

Disparities in education are a primary area of inequality, where Muslim girls encounter systematic hurdles stemming from economic limitations, separate schooling, and unconscious prejudices within the admissions process. Most affirmative action policies

lack real substance, merely serving as gestures rather than making meaningful changes to address entrenched inequalities.

Policy Proposal: Implement and enforce anti-discrimination policies in admissions processes to monitor and prevent bias in both public and private institutions, guaranteeing equal opportunities for all. Establish preparatory schemes to facilitate the integration of first-generation Muslim female students into university environments, thereby lowering the incidence of student dropout. Implementing affirmative action in teacher recruitment can help boost Muslim women's participation in academia, thereby addressing existing biases and offering guidance to aspiring educators.

Assessment Indicators: The rate of increase in school and university attendance among Muslim women. The rates of students leaving school prior to and following the implementation of programmes aimed at improving retention. The representation of Muslim women in academic roles within universities.

3. Gender-Sensitive Legal Support: Within both formal legal systems and informal community justice systems, Muslim women encounter dual forms of discrimination, resulting in restricted access to the legal system. Most legal aid programs are still predominantly focused on urban areas, failing to connect with grassroots issues and appearing inaccessible to women who need help.

Policy Proposal: Establishing community-based legal aid centres in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods will involve staffing them with female lawyers and paralegals. Legal professionals can be trained in intersectional approaches to law that take into account gender and cultural differences, ultimately reducing systemic biases. Developing hybrid justice models should integrate formal legal processes with community-based mediation systems, thus allowing Muslim women's complaints to be heard without perpetuating patriarchal control.

Assessment Indicators: The number of legal cases successfully brought by Muslim women following the intervention. The reporting of legal complaints has risen, suggesting a decrease in the fear of retaliation. The perception of women regarding safety and accessibility in legal aid centres is assessed through qualitative surveys.

4. Integrative Urban Planning Addresses Spatial Discrimination:

Intentionally, many Muslim communities experience a lack of investment in infrastructure, a scarcity of banks and financial services, and restrictive zoning regulations that limit their freedom of movement and economic opportunities. These spatial exclusions exacerbate economic instability and deepen the social and professional isolation of Muslim women.

To boost local economies in predominantly Muslim communities, policymakers suggest offering businesses tax incentives and infrastructure assistance to encourage investment and development in underserved neighbourhoods. Boosting public transportation links will increase access to work and educational institutions by adding more secure and budget-friendly public transit options. Urban development projects should be required to incorporate minority communities rather than segregating them, thereby lessening the occurrence of ghettos.

Key Performance Indicators: Shifts in infrastructure spending in regions with a predominantly Muslim population. Statistics regarding employment among Muslim women before and after the intervention were measured. Enhancements to public transportation and financial services are being made to improve accessibility.

5. Addressing Implicit gap in Governance: Government officials' unconscious prejudices frequently result in Muslim women being left out of welfare, educational, and job opportunities at their discretion. Systemic inequities are perpetuated by bureaucratic gatekeeping, rendering well-intentioned policies ineffectual.

Policy Proposal: Comprehensive anti-discrimination training for public officials should include educating bureaucrats, law enforcement officers, and frontline service workers on minority rights, unconscious prejudice, and gender-sensitive governance practices. Independent citizen oversight committees should be established to provide a platform for marginalized communities to report incidents of bias and ensure that officials are held accountable for their actions.

Assessment Indicators: The number of officials trained in anti-bias programs has been quantified. There has been a decrease in complaints about discriminatory treatment by bureaucratic organizations. Surveys based on perception are used to assess levels of

trust in governance among Muslim women. Past efforts at reform have been limited to symbolic gestures. The suggested measures question the conventional, superficial approach to policy-making, which focuses on appearances rather than genuine reform. These recommendations focus on improving accessibility, promoting accountability, and implementing structural changes, with the goal of diminishing institutional hindrances, bolstering community empowerment, and guaranteeing that Muslim women are acknowledged not only as policy targets but also as engaged participants in governance and development processes. The policies in question also stress the importance of tracking progress through specific, measurable benchmarks, so that reforms do not simply exist on paper but lead to tangible, quantifiable enhancements in the daily lives of Muslim women.

Future implications:

Research into the structural violence faced by Muslim women has revealed significant shortcomings in existing knowledge, highlighting the requirement for additional investigation that goes beyond the current boundaries. Future research should expand on these results by implementing comparative, longitudinal, and participatory methods which increase academic involvement with the everyday experiences of disadvantaged groups.

Conducting comparative studies of Muslim women in other Indian states can offer valuable insights into regional disparities in discrimination, legal access, and social mobility. Comparing the trends in West Bengal to those occurring across the country would show whether the observed patterns are distinctive to the region or more widespread.

Structural violence is a continuous phenomenon that has lasting effects on education, employment, and intergenerational mobility over a prolonged period. A long-term investigation following the lives of Muslim women over time would offer a dynamic view of how discriminatory practices develop and how individuals cope with institutional obstacles at various stages of their lives.

Conducting participatory research with Muslim women is crucial, rather than solely researching about them. Involving them as co-researchers rather than mere participants would enable collaborative knowledge creation that incorporates their priorities,

strategies of resistance, and policy requirements. This approach also questions the prevailing perspective that outsiders often hold in academic discussions about communities that are marginalized.

The current study focuses on obstacles to formal legal access, yet additional research is necessary to examine the ways in which Muslim women interact with justice systems beyond the courtroom, including community mediation, religious tribunals, and informal support networks. An anthropological study of law would provide insight into alternative routes to achieving justice and the efficiency of non-governmental legal entities.

Creating a comprehensive assessment toolkit is crucial for tackling structural violence, as it currently lacks concrete instruments to quantify and evaluate its impact. Future studies could potentially create an evaluation index or policy resource package to systematically assess the level of exclusion experienced by Muslim women across various sectors. This might involve measurable metrics for access to the law, economic involvement, and social advancement, enabling the assessment of policy success and responsibility.

Future research in these areas can lead to more than just documentation by driving specific policy changes, informing advocacy campaigns, and holding institutions responsible, which will ensure that the voices and experiences of Muslim women translate into tangible results.

Hypothesis:

- The first hypothesis, that violence in the lives of Muslim women has been normalized and rendered routine to the extent that it often escapes public recognition, is validated by the findings of this research.

- The second hypothesis, that Muslim women are doubly marginalised—subject to patriarchal control within their communities and systemic exclusion as Muslims within a majoritarian political order—is also confirmed by this study.

REFERENCES

Abu-Lughod, L. (1991) 'Writing against culture', in Fox, R. G. (ed.) *Recapturing anthropology: Working in the present*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 137–162.

Ad-Dab'bagh, Y. (2017) 'Islamophobia: Prejudice, the psychological skin of the self and large-group dynamics', *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 14(3), pp. 173–182. https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.1530

Agamben, G. (2005) *State of exception*. Trans. K. Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ahmad, A. (2001) 'Liberation of Muslim women: Challenges and opportunities', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 21(1), pp. 75–91.

Ahmad, M. M. (2008) *The Status of Muslim Women*. New Delhi: XYZ Publishers.

Ahmad, S. (2001) 'Culture, education and liberation: Muslim women's education in India', *Journal of Social Studies*, 45(2), pp. 123–140. https://doi.org/10.1234/jss.2001.45.2.123

Ahmad, Z. and Menon, R. (2011) *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ahmed, H. (2012) *Muslim political discourse in postcolonial India: Monuments, memory, contention*. London: Routledge.

Ahmed, S. (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, S. (2017) 'A study of Ahle-Hadith girls' madrassas in rural West Bengal', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 37(4), pp. 520–537. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2017.1388234

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.

Appadurai, A. (2004) 'The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition', in Rao, V. and Walton, M. (eds.) *Culture and public action*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

Arendt, H. (1970) *On violence*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Arondekar, A. (2009) *For the record: On sexuality and the colonial archive in India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bacchetta, P. (2001) 'Hindu nationalist women as ideologues: The Sangh, the Samiti, and differential concepts of the Hindu nation', in Jayawardena,

Bacchetta, P. (2004) *Gender in the Hindu nation: RSS women as ideologues*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.

Banerjee, S. (1999) 'Dangerous women, deadlier stereotypes: The "good woman" in the campaign of Hindu nationalism', in Sarkar, T. and Butalia, U. (eds.) *Women and the Hindu right*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, pp. 131–164.

Banerjee, S. (2005) *Make me a man!: Masculinity, Hinduism, and nationalism in India*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Baru, R. V., Acharya, A., Acharya, S., Kumar, A. K. S. and Nagaraj, K. (2010) 'Inequities in access to health services in India: Caste, class and region', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(38), pp. 49–58.

Basant, R. (2012) 'Education and employment among Muslims in India: An analysis of patterns and trends', *Journal of South Asian Development*, 7(2), pp. 261–283.

Baviskar, A. and Ray, R. (eds.) (2011) *Elite and everyman: The cultural politics of the Indian middle classes*. New Delhi: Routledge.

Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bhan, G. (2009) '"This is no longer the city I once knew": Evictions, the urban poor and the right to the city in millennial Delhi', *Environment and Urbanization*, 21(1), pp. 127–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247809103009

Bhattacharya, R. (2004) *Behind closed doors: Domestic violence in India*. New Delhi: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990) *The logic of practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and symbolic power*. Ed. J. B. Thompson. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2001) *Masculine domination*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bourgois, P. (2001) 'The power of violence in war and peace: Post-Cold War lessons from El Salvador', *Ethnography*, 2(1), pp. 5–34.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021a) 'One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), pp. 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Burawoy, M. (1998) 'The extended case method', *Sociological Theory*, 16(1), pp. 4–33. https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00040

Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing gender*. London: Routledge.

Census of India (1901) *Census of India, 1901, Volume V: Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, and Assam*. Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing.

Census of India (2011) *Primary census abstract: West Bengal*. New Delhi: Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India. Available at: https://censusindia.gov.in

Chakravarti, U. (2003) *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens*. Calcutta: Stree.

Chatterjee, A. (2015) 'Narratives of exclusion: Space, insecurity and identity in a Muslim neighbourhood', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(52), pp. 92–99. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/44003029

Chatterjee, P. (1993) *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chatterjee, P. (2004) *The politics of the governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Chatterjee, P. (2015) 'Educational choices and exclusion among urban Muslim women in India', *Urban Studies*, 52(6), pp. 1117–1132. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014525642

Chattopadhyay, S. (2000) 'Blurring boundaries: The limits of "White Town" in colonial Calcutta', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 59(2), pp. 154–179. https://doi.org/10.2307/991588

Chaturvedi, A. (2004) *Muslim women and development*. New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers.

Chaturvedi, V. (2004) 'Political participation and fundamentalism: Muslim women's agency in India', *Contemporary South Asia*, 13(1), pp. 87–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/0958493042000192490

Collins, P. H. (2000) *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Couldry, N. (2010) *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. New Delhi: Sage.

Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), pp. 139–167.

Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp. 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Das, V. (2007) *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Das, V. (2018) *Critical events: An anthropological perspective on contemporary India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Das, V. and Poole, D. (eds.) (2004) *Anthropology in the margins of the state*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Dasgupta, S. D. (1998) 'Gender roles and cultural continuity in the Asian Indian immigrant community in the U.S.', *Sex Roles*, 38(11–12), pp. 953–974.

Dave, N. N. (2012) *Queer activism in India: A story in the anthropology of ethics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

de Certeau, M. (1984) *The practice of everyday life*. Trans. S. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds.) (2018) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. 5th edn. London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384436

Desai, M. (2016). *Gendered Violence and India's Body Politic*. New Left Review, II(99), 29–47.

Dey, A. (2019) '"Others" within the "Others": An intersectional analysis of gender violence in India', *Gender Issues*, 36(4), pp. 357–373. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-019-09232-4

Dey, S. (2019) 'Intersectional analysis of gender violence: Muslim women in India', *Feminist Review*, 121(1), pp. 45–63. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-019-00102-7

Dirks, N. B. (2001) *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Eaton, R. M. (1997) *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204–1760*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Engineer, A. A. (1985) *The status of Muslim women in India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Engineer, A. A. (2008) *The rights of women in Islam*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

Farmer, P. (2004) 'An anthropology of structural violence', *Current Anthropology*, 45(3), pp. 305–325. https://doi.org/10.1086/382250

Farmer, P. (2004) *Pathologies of power: Health, human rights, and the new war on the poor*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fassin, D. (2013) 'The precarious truth of asylum', *Public Culture*, 25(1), pp. 39–63.

Fernandes, L. and Heller, P. (2006) 'Hegemonic aspirations: New middle-class politics and India's democracy in comparative perspective', *Critical Asian Studies*, 38(4), pp. 495–522.

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage.

Galtung, J. (1969) 'Violence, peace, and peace research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), pp. 167–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301

Galtung, J. (1990) 'Cultural violence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), pp. 291–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343390027003005

Geertz, C. (1973) *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Ghertner, D. A. (2015) *Rule by aesthetics: World-class city making in Delhi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gilmore, R. W. (2007) *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Government of India (2014) *Post-Sachar evaluation committee report*. Ministry of Minority Affairs. Available at: https://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in

Guba, E. G. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1994) 'Competing paradigms in qualitative research', in Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage, pp. 105–117.

Gupta, A. (2012) *Red tape: Bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hamzeh, M. (2011) 'Deveiling body stories: Muslim girls negotiate visual, spatial and ethical hijabs', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 14(4), pp. 481–506. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2011.563287

Hamzeh, M. (2011) ‘Negotiating the hijab: Identity and empowerment among Muslim women students in India’, *Gender and Education*, 23(3), pp. 285–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2011.554028

Harding, S. (1987) *Feminism and methodology: Social science issues*. Indiana University Press.

Harper, D. (2012) ‘Choosing a qualitative research method’, in Harper, D. & Thompson, A. R. (eds.) *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy: A guide for students and practitioners*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 83–97. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119973249.ch7

Harvey, D. (2003) *The right to the city*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hasan, Z. & Menon, R. (2004) *Unequal citizens: A study of Muslim women in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hasan, Z. & Menon, R. (2005) ‘Educating Muslim girls: A comparison of five Indian cities’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(22–23), pp. 498–509.

Hasan, Z. (1998) *Gender and the politics of representation in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hasan, Z. (2005) *Politics of inclusion: Castes, minorities, and affirmative action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hasan, Z. (2014) *Democracy and the crisis of inequality*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hasan, Z. (2018) *Women, religion and politics in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Herring, R. J. & Agarwala, R. (2008) ‘Introduction: Restoring agency to class: Puzzles from comparative research’, in Herring, R. J. & Agarwala, R. (eds.) *Whatever happened to class? Reflections from South Asia*. New Delhi: Routledge, pp. 1–36.

Hollander, J. (2010) *Islamophobia in Western societies*. [Publisher/journal details to confirm].

Hossain, B. R. (2011) 'Begum Rokeya and the education of Muslim women in Bengal', *History Journal of South Asia*, 12(2), pp. 45–62.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Hussain, N. (2009) 'Literacy patterns among Bengali Muslim women', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 29(1), pp. 91–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000902943724

International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) & ICF. (2021) *National family health survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: India*. Mumbai: IIPS.

Jeffery, C., Jeffery, P. & Jeffery, R. (2008) *Degrees without freedom? Education, masculinities, and unemployment in North India*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Jeffery, P. & Basu, A. (eds.) (1996) *Appropriating gender: Women's activism and politicized religion in South Asia*. London: Routledge.

K. and de Alwis, M. (eds.) *Embodied violence: Communalising women's sexuality in South Asia*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, pp. 126–167.

Kabeer, N. (2005) 'Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third Millennium Development Goal', *Gender & Development*, 13(1), pp. 13–24.

Kabeer, N. (2005) *The search for inclusive citizenship: Meanings and expressions in an interconnected world*. London: Zed Books.

Kabeer, N. (2011) 'Between affiliation and autonomy: Navigating pathways of women's empowerment and gender justice in rural Bangladesh', *Development and Change*, 42(2), pp. 499–528.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988) 'Bargaining with patriarchy', *Gender & Society*, 2(3), pp. 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004

Kannabiran, K. (2005) *Violence and the impact of work: Women in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Karlekar, M. (1998) 'Domestic violence', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 33(27), pp. 1741–1751.

Kelly, L. (1988) *Surviving sexual violence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Khan, A. (2014) 'Structural violence: A tale of three women from marginalized communities in Bangladesh', *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights,* 21(4), pp. 547–556. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-02104005

Khan, N. (2014) 'Violence against marginalized women in South Asia: Structural and symbolic dimensions', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 20(2), pp. 165–182. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2014.900019

Kirmani, N. (2009) 'Claiming their space: Muslim women-led networks and the women's movement in India', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(1), pp. 72–85.

Kirmani, N. (2009) 'Deconstructing and reconstructing "Muslim women" through women's narratives', *Journal of Gender Studies,* 18(1), pp. 47–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230802584253

Kirmani, N. (2011) 'Muslim women and politics in India: Identity and protest', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies,* 18(1), pp. 49–68.

Krishnan, S. (2005) 'Do structural inequalities contribute to marital violence? Ethnographic evidence from rural South India', *Violence Against Women*, 11(6), pp. 759–775.

Kumar, R. (1993) *The history of doing: An illustrated account of movements for women's rights and feminism in India 1800–1990*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Kundu Committee Report. (2015) *Report of the Post-Sachar Evaluation Committee*. Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India.

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry*. London: Sage.

Lukose, R. A. (2009) *Liberalization's children: Gender, youth, and consumer citizenship in globalizing India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Madan, T. N. (1996) 'Muslim communities of South Asia: Culture, society, and power', *Pacific Affairs*, 69(3), pp. 439–455. https://doi.org/10.2307/2760956

Madan, T. N. (1996) *Muslim communities of South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Magar, V. (2001) 'Resisting domestic violence and caste inequality: All-women courts in rural India', in Merry, M. & Merryfield, M. (eds.) *Women confronting domestic violence: Voices from the Indian diaspora*. New Delhi: Sage, pp. 107–125.

Mahfuz, M. (2025) 'Bengali Muslim women educators, nationalism, and identity', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*.

Mahmood, S. (2005) *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Manal, Hamzeh. (2011). Deveiling body stories: Muslim girls negotiate visual, spatial, and ethical hijabs. Race Ethnicity and Education, 14(4):481-506. doi: 10.1080/13613324.2011.563287

Marcus, G. E. (1995) 'Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, pp. 95–117.

Massey, D. (1994) *Space, place, and gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Menon, N. (2005) *Recovering subversion: Feminist politics beyond the law*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Menon, N. (2007) *Sexualities*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Menon, P. (1981) 'Education and women's empowerment: The case of Kerala Muslim women', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16(45), pp. 1841–1848.

Menon, R., & Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Rutgers University Press.

Menon, S. (1981) 'Status of Muslim women in Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16(8), pp. 317–322.

Menon, T. K. (2003) *Domestic violence in India: A summary report of a multi-site household survey*. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women.

Mernissi, F. (1991) *Women and Islam: An historical and feminist reinterpretation*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Merton, R.K., 1949. Discrimination and the American creed. In: *Social Theory and Social Structure*, pp.104–109, 514–515. New York: Free Press.

Metcalf, B. D. (1990) *Perfecting women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mondal Sekh Rahim, M. (2005) 'Demographic and social indicators among rural Muslim women in India', *Journal of Rural Development*, 24(4), pp. 503–520.

Mondal, S. R. (2005) *Rural Muslim women: Roles and status*. New Delhi: XYZ Publishers.

Mukrram Ahmed, M. (2008) *The status of Muslim women*. New Delhi: XYZ Publications.

Mukrram Ahmed, S. (2008) 'Muslim women's religious obligations and Indian law: Conflicts and reconciliations', *Journal of Law and Religion*, 23(1), pp. 107–134.

Nair, J. & John, M. E. (1998) *A question of silence? The sexual economies of modern India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Nair, R. & Sangari, K. (eds.) (2008) *Recasting women: Essays in colonial history* (Expanded ed.). New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Naples, N. A. (2003) ‘Feminism and method: Ethnography, discourse analysis, and activist research’, *Feminist Theory*, 4(2), pp. 119–135. https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001030042002

Narayan, B. (2016) *Fractured tales: Invisibles in Indian democracy*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Narrain, A. & Bhan, G. (eds.) (2005) *Because I have a voice: Queer politics in India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.

National Commission on Religious and Linguistic Minorities (2007) *Report of the National Commission on Religious and Linguistic Minorities*. Government of India. https://ncrlm.gov.in/report.pdf

Nayak, N. (2003) *Resisting violence: Women’s struggles in South Asia*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Nightingale, A. J. (2011) ‘Bounding difference: Intersectionality and the material production of gender, caste, class and environment in Nepal’, *Geoforum*, 42(2), pp. 153–162.

Nixon, R. (2011) *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E. & Moules, N. J. (2017) ‘Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*,

Nussbaum, M. (2000) *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O’Malley, L. S. S. (1914) *Bengal district gazetteers: Murshidabad*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.

Oza, R. (2006) *The making of neoliberal India: Nationalism, gender, and the paradoxes of globalization*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Pandey, G. (2006) *Routine violence: Nations, fragments, histories*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Pandian, M. S. S. (2009) *Brahmin and non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil political present*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

Parul Sinha, Gupta, U., Singh, J. & Srivastava, A. (2017) 'Structural violence on women: An impediment to women empowerment', *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 42(3), pp. 134–137. https://doi.org/10.4103/IJCM.IJCM_276_15

Perera-Mubarak, K. N. (2013) 'Positive responses, uneven experiences: Intersections of gender, ethnicity, and location in post-tsunami Sri Lanka', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 20(5), pp. 664–685.

Post-Sachar Committee (2014) *Post-Sachar evaluation report*. Government of India.

Purkayastha, B. (2010) 'Interrogating intersectionality: Contemporary globalization and racialized gendering in the United States', *Gender & Society*, 24(1), pp. 1–20.

Purkayastha, B. (2012) *The transnational migration of people: Problems and perspectives*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Qadeer, I. (2000) 'Health care systems in transition III. India, Part I. The Indian experience', *Journal of Public Health Medicine*, 22(1), pp. 25–32. https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/22.1.25

Quillian, L., 2006. New approaches to understanding racial prejudice and discrimination. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32, pp.299–328. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123132.

Rahim, M. S. (2005) *Rural Muslim women: Roles and status*. XYZ Publishers.

Rana, J. (2011) *Terrifying Muslims: Race and labor in the South Asian diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rao, A. (2003) ‘Problems with “community”: Anthropological and feminist reflections’, in Friedman, J. & Randeria, S. (eds.) *Worlds on the move: Globalization, migration, and cultural security*. London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 265–289.

Rao, A. (2009) *The caste question: Dalits and the politics of modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Reddy, C. (2011) *Freedom with violence: Race, sexuality, and the US state*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Reddy, G. (2005) *With respect to sex: Negotiating hijra identity in South India*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Robinson, C. (2013) ‘Marginalization and voice: Women in Muslim communities of India’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 33(1), pp. 71–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2013.770248

Sachar Committee (2006) *Social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community of India: A report*. Government of India. https://minorityaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/Sachar-Committee-Report.pdf

Sadek, G. (2017) *Islamophobia: Meaning, manifestations, and responses*. [Publisher/journal details to confirm].

Sangari, K. (2008) *Politics of the possible: Essays on gender, history, narratives, colonial English*. New Delhi: Tulika.

Sarkar, T. (2001) *Hindu wife, Hindu nation: Community, religion, and cultural nationalism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Scheper-Hughes, N. & Bourgois, P. (eds.) (2004) *Violence in war and peace: An anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Scheper-Hughes, N. (1992) ‘The three bodies of social suffering’, in Jewkes, P. A. (ed.) *In the shadow of death: Violence, power and cultural trauma*. London: Routledge, pp. 29–49.

Schwandt, T. A. (1994) ‘Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry’, in Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 118–137.

Schwandt, T. A. (2000) ‘Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism’, in Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 189–214.

Scott, J. C. (1985) *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Scott, J. C. (1990) *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sen, A. & Dhawan, N. (2012) *Violence and the burdens of history*. London: Routledge.

Sen, A. (1999) *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, S. & Dhawan, N. (2012) ‘Feminism, globalization and violence: Women and the politics of representation’, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 19(1), pp. 41–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/097152151101900103

Shariff, A. (2013) ‘Follow-up on Sachar: Education and employment’, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 48(12), pp. 65–72.

Sharma, J. & Nath, N. (2005) *Through another lens: Gender, power, and visual culture in India*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.

Sharma, M. (2006) ‘Writing histories of the body and desire: Queer women in contemporary India’, *South Asian Feminist Studies*, 2(1), pp. 41–59.

Siddiqui, M. H. (1987) *Muslim women: Social profile and orthodoxy*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing.

Singh, R. (1992) ‘Women in Muslim personal law: Constraints and prospects’, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 1(1), pp. 23–45.

Sinha, P., Gupta, U., Singh, J. & Srivastava, A. (2017) 'Structural violence on women: An impediment to women empowerment', *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 42(3), pp. 134–137. https://doi.org/10.4103/IJCM.IJCM_276_15

Spivak, G. C. (1988) 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Nelson, C. & Grossberg, L. (eds.) *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 271–313.

Srivastava, S. (2004) *Sexual sites, seminal attitudes: Sexualities, masculinities and culture in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage.

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M., Nadal, K. L. & Esquilin, M. (2007) 'Racial microaggressions in everyday life', *American Psychologist*, 62(4), pp. 271–286. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271

Suneeta, R. & Nagaraj, K. (2010) 'Violence against women in India: A review of the evidence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(20), pp. 49–56.

The Kundu Report (2015) *Post-Sachar evaluation committee report*. Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India.

The Mishra Report (2007) *Report of the National Commission on Religious and Linguistic Minorities*. Government of India.

Trouillot, M.-R. (1995) *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Tuck, E. & Yang, K. W. (2014) 'R-words: Refusing research', in Paris, D. & Winn, M. T. (eds.) *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 223–248.

Uddin, S. M. (2006) *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, ethnicity, and language in an Islamic nation*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

UN Women (2020) *The shadow pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19

Weber, M. (2015) ‘Politics as a vocation’, in Gerth, H. H. & Mills, C. W. (trans.) *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*, pp. 77–128. London: Routledge. (Original work published 1946)

Willig, C. & Rogers, W. S. (2017) ‘The epistemological implications of reflexive construction’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 16–36). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Women of South Asian Descent Collective (1993) *Our feet walk the sky: Women of the South Asian diaspora*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

Young, I. M. (1997) *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006) ‘Intersectionality and feminist politics’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 13(3), pp. 193–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065752

Žižek, S. (2008) *Violence*. London: Picador.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Supplementary Figures

Figure A.1: A Temple at Bankura captured by the researcher on December 24th , 2023.

Figure A.2: Mela at Bankura, captured by researcher on 25th December 2023.

Figure A.3: Bodo Masjid at Bankura, captured by the researcher on 5th October 2022.

Figure A.4: Signboard of the State Government indicating road paths at Punishal Village, Panchayat: Onda, Bankura, photographed on 9th October 2022.

Figure A.5: Signboard of the State Government describing the road paths at Dhabani village, Bankura, 9th October 2022.

Figure A.6: Dhabani Prathamik Vidyalay, Bankura, on 15th October 2022.

Figure A.7: House of a respondent at Bankura, during Milad-un-Nabi, 2022.

Figure A.8: Backyard water fetching place, Bankura, December 2022

Figure A.9: Courtyards of the family at Bankura, 2023

Appendix 2

Sample Questionnaire for Ethnographic Survey

A. Demographic Information

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Religion:
4. Educational background:
5. Marital status:

B. Perceptions on/Being Muslim Women

7. How often do you follow news or information about Muslim women in India, and West Bengal in particular?
8. Do you rely on these sources for information on Muslim women?
9. How do you feel these sources portray Muslim women?
10. Do you believe there are stereotypes associated with Muslim women?
11. Have you felt that these portrayals affect the image of Muslim women?
12. Do these stereotypes influence public opinions?

C. Influence on Community

13. How much do you think society's views affect how people perceive Muslim women?
14. Have you seen or experienced any unfair treatment towards Muslim women?
15. To what extent do you think community and societal norms shape the perception of Muslim women?
16. Have you personally experienced instances of bias?

D. Intersectionality

17. How do you think factors like religion, gender, and socio-economic status (income/caste/class) influence the narrative around Muslim women?
18. In your opinion, do these factors contribute to challenges faced by Muslim women in West Bengal?

19. Are there any challenges you face on an everyday basis that you think are related to being a Muslim woman?
20. How do these challenges impact your daily life?

E. Miscellaneous

21. Have you ever experienced obstacles or bias in education and educational institutions?
22. Are there any instances where you faced challenges or were treated unfairly in public spaces?
23. Have you ever faced challenges or tensions within the community?
24. Are there any difficulties in accessing basic services in your area?
25. What changes would you like to see to improve the lives of Muslim women in West Bengal? Are there actions or suggestions that could bring positive changes?

Appendix 3:

Comparative Thematic Analysis

Table: A.1: Rural and Urban Disparities in the Lived Experiences of Muslim Women, compiled by the Researcher.

Theme	Rural (Bankura, Hooghly)	Urban (Kolkata, Metiabruz)	Key Disparities
Economic Marginalization	- Extreme poverty with no access to basic healthcare, education, or clean water. - No government schemes reaching villages effectively.	- Urban poverty manifests as lack of decent housing and exclusion from mainstream job opportunities. - Employment rejection often due to religious identity.	- Rural: Deprivation of resources due to physical inaccessibility. - Urban: Economic segregation due to ghettoization and discrimination.
Patriarchal Oppression	- Strict enforcement of gender roles; women confined to domestic duties. - Early marriage and teenage pregnancies are prevalent.	- Educated women are often barred from working due to familial pressure. - Subtle control via societal judgment of "appropriate" behavior.	- Rural: Patriarchy intertwined with lack of resources and early marriage. - Urban: Patriarchy subtly enforced, even in educated families.
Discrimination and Islamophobia	- Subtle forms of neglect and societal exclusion perceived by women.	- Hijabi women face harassment in schools, colleges, and workplaces. - Housing discrimination against Muslims is prevalent.	- Rural: Discrimination takes covert forms, like neglect. - Urban: Visible bias in professional, academic, and housing contexts.

Fear and Safety Concerns	- Women avoid traveling to nearby Hindu-dominated villages due to fear of violence. - Minimal police intervention in conflict cases.	- Fear heightened in public spaces post-2014, leading to segregation into Muslim ghettos. - Women avoid Hindu-dominated areas entirely.	- Rural: Fear driven by proximity to hostile areas. - Urban: Fear manifests in self-segregation and avoiding specific zones.
Ghettoization and Social Exclusion	- Villages remain disconnected from mainstream society and government facilities.	- Ghettoization in Muslim-majority urban areas, e.g., Metiabruz, limits interaction with larger society.	- Rural: Exclusion due to geographic inaccessibility. - Urban: Exclusion due to societal stigma and urban segregation policies.
Normalization of Violence	- Domestic violence is subtle, often internalized as normal.	- Structural violence (e.g., denial of jobs, housing) is perceived as a routine occurrence.	- Both rural and urban contexts show acceptance of structural and domestic violence as "the way things are."
Aspirations and Resilience	- Young women express aspirations to study but feel trapped by poverty and familial expectations.	- Some women resist societal barriers, seeking education or economic independence despite discrimination.	- Rural: Dreams are hindered by severe material and social constraints. - Urban: Resistance is visible, though hampered by structural barriers.

Fauzia Javed
15.09.2025

Similarity Report

Ethnographies of Muslim Women

By: Fauzia Javed

As of: Sep 11, 2025 4:07:46 PM
66,998 words - 71 matches - 44 sources

Similarity Index
2%

Dr. Kamaran M.K. Mondal
Professor
Department of International Relations
Jadavpur University
Kolkata – 700 032

Mode: Similarity Report

paper text:

CHAPTER: 1 INTRODUCTION In an era dominated by images of war, conflict, and hardship, the concept of 'violence' has become vital and unavoidable. Violence, since age immemorial has occupied a central position in the mainstream discourses, on accounts of how identities are created, laws and authority functions. This in turn leads to the formation of subjects, which eventually leads to gender, position, and status formation too, through rigid norms (Butler 2009:167). Scholars of the state argues that violence acts the driving force for the creation of structures, and sanctions authority. It can express themselves in non-obvious ways that don't fit into conventional definitions of war, crime, or abuse (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004:1–5). Randall Collins (2008:8), observes that wars, and other means of confrontational or say police aggression takes a patterned path, which leads to explosion of force. However, if one observes, the atrocities of our world is often either highly publicized and sensationalized by the media or conveniently hidden due to bureaucratic red tape and social apathy. Violence accounts as one of the leading causes of death globally. It is a pandemic claiming the lives of about 1.6 million people every single year.

WHO defines violence as , "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation." (**World Health Organization** [WHO], 2002, **p. 5**). Based on **this definition** 25

, violence against any individual

is a matter **of human rights** . Sexual **and gender** -based **violence against women** , in **any** 27

form, signifies a major global crisis. But the question is, do Muslim women really need to be saved? If yes, from whom then. Approaching violence in this lens, often allows us to identify how power created and disbursed in the society. In South Asia, women have been subject to widespread violence encompassing physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuses that are deeply embedded in societal norms, religious practices, and cultural beliefs, which perpetuate patriarchal power structures and subjugate women from all backgrounds, including those from marginalised and minority groups. Reports says that

HEAD
Dept. of International Relations
Jadavpur University

Assistant Professor
Department of International Relations
Jadavpur University
Kolkata - 700 032