

**CARTOGRAPHY OF POWER: HINDU-MUSLIM
RELATIONSHIP IN THE MIXED NEIGHBORHOODS
IN CALCUTTA, 1947-1992**

SYNOPSIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
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Synopsis:

**Cartography of Power: Hindu-Muslim Relationship in the Mixed Neighborhoods in
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The thesis aims to understand the changing contours of relationship between the middle-class Hindus and Muslims in the mixed neighborhoods in Calcutta during 1947-1992. The theme calls for further elaboration to avoid generalization and understand the nuances of the work. This is a study which is largely ethnographic in character with historical underpinnings. Ethnographic explorations are often critiqued for lacking objectivity because the respondents might gauge the attitude and opinion of the researcher and frame their accounts accordingly. I have tried to overcome this limitation to the best of my ability; firstly by combining ethnography with macro-history, often authenticated by the archival sources and secondly by recording diverse voices from both Hindu and Muslim communities, revealing plurality and oppositional nature of opinions within each community. I have, however, chosen the interlocutors, from the middle-class sections of both the communities. This was partly a question of my convenience, but also due to the realization that communal and class identities are historically entangled. Before delving more into this issue, let me first begin with the basics: A. Who; B. Where; C. When, D. How.

A. The subjects: The middle-class Hindus in Kolkata majorly refer to the Bengali-speaking-salaried and /or professional class, while only a handful of them represent the middle-ranging business people and entrepreneurs. For their Muslim counterparts, they majorly belong to the Hindi-speaking middle-ranging commercial classes and a few of them are salaried professionals. The age group in conversation has been varied and wide—the interlocutors are between their thirties and eighties. The discussions I had with them were mostly in their drawing rooms, which often ensured participation of the full family including both genders.

At a glance, it is clear that people who are manual labourers are not included in the survey. This has two reasons. It has not been possible for me as a researcher to get access into their houses

mainly because of my class position and also due to the nature of my questionnaire. When I did try, since the questions revolved around their intimate community histories, the limited responses I got, seemed to be on the surface level. More or less, they have answered around familiar tropes of being too occupied in work, having no time left to invest in ‘Hindu/Muslim’ mischief, that the events of communal polarization are simply a tool for securing power by political leaders and so on. Due to lack of contact, it has not been possible to gather adequate samples to bring up the nuances within their arguments. As the Covid pandemic hit the world, it shut the doors of the academic buildings (the libraries and the archives) as well as stopped access to the houses of my interlocutors. This also complicated the possibility to make inroads into the working class slum areas in these neighborhoods.

This brings me to the second reason. I found a host of interlocutors who are like me, especially from the Muslim middle-classes. For them, I was someone ready to listen to their side of the stories, a safe space to open up. They have repeatedly mentioned how much they aspired to become the ‘true middle- class’ with a cultural refashioning of the self, how they have longed to be judged through the same lens with which one judges a traditional Hindu *bhadralok*. The Bengali Muslims however found the lens more readily at hand than the Hindi-speaking ones, for the latter it is still a difficult task. On the other hand the Hindus in these areas have found someone in me who can realize their sense of estrangement living in a Muslim majority *para by* the merit of being a Hindu myself. Another kind of Hindu response is also possible. For many Hindu households, I was an outsider, who is fortunate and privileged enough to have a house in a ‘clean’ and ‘peaceful’ Bengali locality and has been spared the horror of living in close quarters with the Muslims. This leads to the third aspect of the story. The middle-class Hindus, when asked about what they think about the ‘Muslims’, responded pointing directly to the lower class Muslims who are more ghettoized, live in squatters and shanties, and work as daily wage earners in the unorganized sector. Often they belong to the class of menial service providers- garbage pickers, newspaper vendors, fruit sellers and so on. One reason for such a skewed outlook is definitely due to very limited representation of the Muslim middle-classes in the salaried professional organized sectors. Yet the fact remains that in the psyche of Hindu *bhadralok*, the Muslims in general have never been given an intimate place except in rhetorical terms. On the other hand, the vertical mobility in some sections of the minority has led to a heightened sense of anxiety and insecurity among the Hindu middle-classes who have always held ‘education and

culture over money'. Being 'cultured' for them works by the logic of caste system: it is an innate and ascribed status which is rarely to be found among the minorities. Therefore to them, the Muslims either belong to the 'uncultured' lowly classes or they are the 'culture-less' extravagant nouveau-riche. The middle-class Muslims are practically invisible to them. Due to their limited presence as their colleagues/classmates in the schools, colleges and universities, the middle-class-ness among the Muslims is a 'rarity', a mere exception. This is also due to the fact that Muslims, in general, find it hard to get a residence in a Hindu-majority neighborhood. Hence, despite maintaining obvious differences from the lower-class Muslims, the middle-class Muslim houses are very close to the congested slum areas. This spatial dynamics, thus, re-enforces the communal stereotypes prevalent among the majoritarian collective psyche and this brings up the second question.

B. Where/Location: My survey spanned through widely distributed localities like Entally, Park Circus, Tiljala, Tangra, Beniapukur, Topsia, Garden Reach, Metiabruz, Khidirpur, Santoshpur—across the east and west axis of the city. Generally, these areas are dubbed 'notorious', 'crime-friendly' and 'unsafe'; all denoting a lack of restraint and law and order. For middle-class Hindu residents, these neighborhoods are un-gentrified, inhospitable, and 'filthy', even unsafe to travel. However, contrary to popular opinion, a number of Hindu families, Bengali/non-Bengali both, reside here also, often for at least three-four generations. The areas under my survey also have considerable sections of migrant labour households and slums belonging to both the Hindus and Muslims.

The thesis argues that the idea of home is related to the extension of the outer world; hence it breeds a sort of anxiety among the interlocutors when they construct their identities vis-a-vis the other communities based on their claims in the city. Thus, the Hindus who belong to the majority community in the city as well as in India feel intimidated and persecuted while staying in these areas. They look at their co-religionists who live in traditional Hindu *paras* as the privileged citizens. On the other hand, the Muslims who had been ghettoized in these areas feel intimidated once they step out, more so in recent times. The feelings of antagonism, otherization and estrangement are not measurable in absolute terms; they vary in degrees and manners; often socio-political events enable contingent conditions for a certain type of behavioral pattern and

identity formation. Therefore, the mixed neighborhoods form a wonderful backdrop in which certain contesting identities could be located in a kaleidoscopic manner.

C. When/Time Frame: The years between 1947 and 1992 play through the thesis. It talks about how the city took the brunt of Partition riots, the policies of refugee rehabilitation and how those affected the communal schisms, the Riots of 1950 and 1964, how the Left politics made its impact in Bengal on the inter-communal relationship and so on. I intended to put a stop with the Babri Riots. Indeed, this is the last major historical event in my thesis. This was also the last major communal outburst in the city, that too after a gap of three decades. Of course, as it is evident, this work is not a narrative solely on the riot violence. However, the descriptions of post-1947 riots in Calcutta are rare in the academia, and to bridge the gap, the thesis has dealt with them significantly. Further, it tries to bring up the everyday contestations between the stakeholders in a neighborhood and understand how this has evolved through a series of socio-political events operating at the backdrop. Hence, while being in the field, I have found out that the supposedly watershed events do not always match with the lived experiences of the oral narrative. Also, the city-space transformed fundamentally in the 1990s with the onset of Liberalization and the consequent boom in the South Asian urbanity. This has in more than one way impacted the contours of communal relationship between the residents leading to newer hierarchies and regrouping of identities. Also, the interlocutors have repeatedly talked about how they have sensed greater polarization after 2014, and perhaps, this has made the decades of Nehruvian pluralism followed by Leftist secularism a distant reality, alive only in collective memories and myths. Hence, the chronological narrative in this thesis is often both thematic and historical: it is an attempt to locate the histories of mentalities in motion.

D. Methodology/How: Based on these premises, it seems clear that the thesis is actually a blend of two forms of narrative: historical and ethnographical. The archival materials from the post-colonial years are hardly kept systematically; often, they remain inaccessible under the mysterious domain of ‘confidentiality.’ Yet, the limited archival sources for the period found up to the 1960s on Calcutta have helped to shape the first part of the thesis as a work of traditional history. The stories of violence, the way it spread, the way it was managed, and the way it was remembered are significant to understand the following years which marked a very negligible presence of communal violence. One cannot but feel that the lack of violence partly means lack

of documentation by the state and by the media. Does this lack of documentation mean lack of History? The second part of the thesis is an attempt precisely to bridge the gap. If all was well, how can one explain the outburst of Babri Riots in 1992 after 30 years? How can one explain the intense polarization and small-scale violence frequently taking place in and around Kolkata in recent years? Hence, I had no option left other than to take recourse to ethnographic surveys from people living in the mixed neighborhoods. I argue that though the communities perceive each other in dynamic and multifaceted ways, yet the construction of the majority-minority relationship is not based solely on statistical representations. It is constructed through a complex framework of power relations, embedded in spatial settings and social representations. Alongside, of course, the thesis intends to ask some macro-historical questions such as—what were the moments of departure in Partition riots and how its aftermath affected Calcutta cartographically and ontologically. To what extent, co-habitation and accommodation were successful in these localities? Is it at all possible to carve a well-grounded history of post-colonial communal practices between the groups? How much cultural change did the Left regime after 1977 bring in terms of class and communal ideology? What went wrong in the 1980s which made the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement a success nationally, and also had an impact in Calcutta? How did the formation and expectations of the middle-class change with the LPG reforms and how did the ‘fear of small number’ affect them?

Thus, to sum up, the thesis explores how the middle-class Hindus and Muslim perceive each other and position their identities within the complex landscape of relationships in specific socio-temporal conjectures embedded in the politics of spatiality. Therefore, a theoretical triad of communalism, neighborhood dynamics and middle-class-ness form the foundation of the present work.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first one is essentially thematic: it talks about the genesis of the colonial middle-classes in Calcutta, how the Hindu and Muslim middle-class had a different trajectory of growth, how they evolved through their entangled relationship with the colonial modernity and, most importantly, how they fashioned their selves and the Other in this process. The chapter locates how through these process, two re-publicized religions became constitutive of the realities of nationalist politics in post-colonial India.

From the second chapter onwards, I have tried to interlink two broad schemas at two different levels in this work which have made the chronology of the events both historical and thematic. At the first level, as demonstrated in the second chapter, I have argued how the internal partitions within the city have always been hierarchical based on caste, class, ethnicity and how these divisions have reinforced communal differences in colonial and post-colonial years. At the second level, in the third chapter, I take recourse to extensive archival materials to reconstruct the years between 1947-1960s focusing on the riots of 1947, 1950 and 1964 as well as on the movement of population and its political repercussions. Each event of communal outbreak led to re-ordering of physical space within the cityscape which gerrymandered the psychological imagined boundaries among the communities. Thus it argues that the notion of the ‘city in decline’ achieved permanence across the centuries and each time, the hierarchies of race, class, occupation, caste or religion was evoked to adjust the shifting of blame for the supposed doom. This chapter also delves into deeper understanding of ‘violence’, ‘prejudice’ and ‘conflict’ – how they are inter-related, how one leads to the other, and yet these three sociological expressions of inter-community relations have an autonomy of their own.

What happens if the conditions to transform conflict into violence are not entirely present? How to articulate the differences? What about the prejudices then? How far the borderline engagement of cultural differences between the communities is consensual? How conflict re-aligns customary boundaries? We found out how Muslims became ghettoized in specific *muhallas* after the communal outbreaks. Yet, some of these enclaves comprise a number of Hindu Bengali middle-class residents along with extensive slums of migrant Hindus. Hindus, in these enclaves, are minority in terms of demographic figure. Are they so culturally? The next chapters find out about the everyday contestations of Hindus and Muslims in these enclaves through the lens of altered, if not reversed, majority and minority dimension.

The fourth and the fifth chapters signify the methodological break in this work. These chapters attempt to propose an alternative approach to the study of identity — one that uses the lens of space to allow for multiplicity, flexibility and complexity in the continuous production and reproduction of identities. By asking several questions and initiating a discussion at a level

playing field, I argue that the ideas of selfhood are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past. It is through locating ourselves in such narratives that we constitute our social identities and ‘come to be who we are (however, ephemeral, multiple, and changing)’. By fixing meanings, these narratives allow for the instability of identifications, and their ‘troubled’ natures, to surface. Hence these chapters should be judged as an attempt to understand how people make sense of their world by understanding the dialectics of dwelling within the spatial settings of mixed neighborhoods in Kolkata. They show that proximity does not guarantee intimacy especially in quarters where residents belong to different religious orientation, that too Hindus and Muslims who are the ‘quintessential other’ of each other. These localities also provide excellent window to realize the formation of mini ethno-national symbols through the space of quotidian contestation. This, in turn, provides avenues for establishing power and hierarchies with communal identities. Thus like the nations, the neighborhoods are not only lived and experienced, they are also imagined and narrated. While for Muslim interlocutors, these neighborhoods ensure warmth of homeliness against the violence of the urban, for Hindu residents, this statement works in reverse. A ‘politics of distinction’ play a central role in shaping the identity and politics of the Hindu middle-classes which is manifested through maintaining socio-spatial distance from not only Muslims, but also from the urban poor in general. Discursive representations of new middle-class lifestyles have been increasingly interwoven into creation of an urban aesthetic based on the middle-class desire for the management of urban space on the basis of strict class-based separations.

These two chapters, if read together, show how the liberal accommodative outlook of staying together in proximity with the Muslims is indeed rarely seen among the Hindu respondents. As it is, Muslims are not encouraged at all to have a home in Hindu areas. Now, in these mixed pockets also, inner boundaries are coming up fast. The Hindus are forming cooperative like structures, obviously constitutionally unsanctioned, to prevent the local Muslims to rent and buy property in their areas. On the other hand, some are selling off their property at high prices to Muslims and moving away to more ‘gentrified’ localities such as Behala, Garia and obviously to New Town. With the political changes over recent years, as the dominant discourse started to revolve around the primordial identity sentiments, this divisive everydayness is becoming

regularized. The narrative would then be more meaningful with the final chapter, majorly focused on the 1990s.

The last chapter has twofold inter-connected motives—it begins with the growth of Hindutva politics in the post-colonial years, how the Sangh Combine has adapted itself with changing socio-political requirements with necessary additions and alterations in their core principles and how the decade of 1980s witnessed proliferation of intense mobilization of ethno-religious symbols. In this connection, the chapter discusses the Babri Riots in details and its impact in Calcutta. I argue, with examples, that despite limited casualty at this time, the Left Front Government did never come up with an ideological challenge to the growing ethno-nationalism. Taking cue from the land-grab drive witnessed during the Babri Riots, in the final section, I have talked about the changing social structure of Calcutta and how a mega boom in south Asian urbanity redrew the social fabric in the mixed neighborhoods. Thus, the thesis consistently highlights the structural hierarchies and systemic inequalities inherent in urban life, observable both in times of peace and during episodes of riot violence. In this context, it also seeks to understand how ‘chosen trauma’ revolves around a notion of a unified Muslim ‘enemy-other’ against whom ‘the Hindus’ can unite and project their anger and hate. Chosen traumas are more likely to resonate with their audiences in cases of rapid change and uncertain structural realities – in times of increased existential anxiety and ontological insecurity. The chapters in the thesis argue that such chosen trauma also rests in the generational and collective memory of the citizens. Thus, during every riot, violence on the other party is legitimized on the basis of actual as well as imagined trauma the latter have inflicted on the perpetrator. To understand this better, along with the events of violence, I also focused on the everyday as the primary site of inquiry. For, it was in the ordinary, in the mundane, and in the routine that the most resilient forms of prejudice and ways of navigating them remained etched.

With my limited capability and reach, I seek to provide a space for voicing the lived experiences of the people who feel that their side of the story is always unheard. This thesis does not belong to the genre of conventional history. However, the chronicles of the present have brought us to some perilous questions. With rising tide of polarization in the country along with an increasing majoritarian drive to legitimize machineries for Hindutva, this thesis channelizes the crisis

inwards. Instead of looking at the binaries of the Nehruvian era belonging to the domain of liberal secular sanitized politics and the present regime as inherently authoritarian and anti-minority, I have looked into identitarian fault-lines from within. The space in which oppositional relationships are negotiated and contested is discursively marked and corporeally practiced. In a physical concrete space, ideological boundaries are built by the residents which are 'utopic' in their 'heterotopic' settings. Thus, the traditional majority-minority concept linked with enumeration, statistics and demography falls short here, which leads to diverse sets of constructions of the 'other' and multiple forms of assertion of power. By making legible social relations of power, identities coalesce around collective memories of the past, experiences of the present, and aspirations for the future. This is a continuous process which happens against a constantly evolving backdrop of construction, destruction, and renewal shaped by complex politics of identity and place.