

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

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## SYNOPSIS

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

#### **Introduction**

Violence against women is a multifaceted phenomenon, extending beyond immediate physical harm to include structural, symbolic, and everyday forms that often remain invisible. This study investigates how Muslim women in West Bengal experience accumulative invisible violence (AIV)—a form of harm that unfolds gradually through social, economic, cultural, and institutional mechanisms. Drawing on ethnographic research, feminist theory, and critical violence studies, the thesis foregrounds women's lived experiences, capturing how invisible forms of marginalization intersect with historical legacies, socio-political structures, and gendered oppression.

In contemporary India, Muslim women occupy a unique intersection of gender, religion, class, and caste, making them especially vulnerable to multiple forms of structural and symbolic exclusion. While overt acts of violence, such as riots, sexual assault, and communal conflict, are widely documented and theorized (Galtung, 1969; Das, 2007), less attention has been paid to the cumulative, subtle, and normalized forms of harm that pervade everyday life. These include restricted access to education and employment, microaggressions, social humiliation, moral policing, and systemic neglect. This study positions these forms of invisible violence as both socially produced and deeply embedded within historical and contemporary structures of inequality.

#### **Statement of Purpose:**

In the early 21st century, conversations about violence have moved beyond overt brutality and conflict, acknowledging that harm can be subtle, entrenched in systems, and deeply rooted within social structures (Galtung, 1969; Nixon, 2011). The persistent invisibility of Muslim women in West Bengal results from a complex interplay of socio-economic disadvantage, religious prejudice, and patriarchal domination (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Sen & Dhawan, 2012). Acts of harm, including denying welfare benefits, excluding individuals from decision-making processes, and silencing them in public, frequently go undetected by official frameworks that concentrate on quantifiable, singular incidents (Farmer, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991).

This thesis posits that structural violence functions through the commonplace marginalisation of individuals, which is perpetuated by state bureaucracy, social apathy, and prevailing cultural

narratives. Despite the presence of anti-violence legislation and advocacy initiatives, the issue of systemic neglect of Muslim women remains under-studied. The research relies on ethnographic field data, state records, and theoretical frameworks and stresses the pressing requirement to redefine violence by equating harm and violence, in order to fully comprehend the spectrum of insidious, persistent oppression affecting the lives of Muslim women in Bengal.

### **Literature Review:**

Visible violence captures immediate, recognizable harm, often drawing public attention and documentation. Examples include riots, lynchings, sexual assaults, and communal conflicts, which are represented in media, historical accounts, and political discourses (Young, 1997; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). The public visibility of these acts ensures social recognition but does not account for the enduring structural and psychological consequences that linger beyond the immediate event.

In contrast, invisible violence is subtle, cumulative, and frequently normalized. It manifests in everyday experiences, such as exclusion from education, humiliation in institutional settings, surveillance of women's mobility, biased employment practices, and restrictions within domestic and social spaces. Its power lies in its intangibility—undetected in conventional definitions of violence, yet persistent in undermining dignity, autonomy, and social belonging over time.

Galtung's (1969) distinction between direct and structural violence provides a foundational framework. While structural violence emphasizes systemic inequalities like poverty, illiteracy, and malnutrition, it often neglects the personal, lived experience of suffering. Veena Das (2007) extends this insight, showing how violence permeates the everyday routines of life, influencing communication, behavior, and spatial inhabitation. The cumulative effects of such invisible violence become nearly imperceptible yet shape individuals' capacities to act and belong.

Feminist historians such as Menon and Bhasin (1998) and Butalia (1998) illustrate the tension between visible and invisible forms of violence, especially during the Partition. Sexual violence was often highly visible in physical acts but suppressed in historical remembrance due to shame, social stigma, and nationalist narratives. This interplay of spectacle and silence underscores the hidden, cumulative harms that Muslim women in Bengal continue to face.

Displacement, sexual violence, and forced conversions are widely documented (Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Butalia, 1998; Chatterji, 2007). Post-Partition "repatriation" programs, nominally designed to rescue abducted women, often reinforced patriarchal control, treating

women as communal property and silencing their voices (Das, 1990). Economic marginalization further compounded their vulnerability, as women entered insecure labor markets with limited access to education and healthcare (Datta, 2012).

Existing research on Bengal largely focuses on macro-level community narratives, overshadowing individual voices and lived experiences. While Punjab and North India have received significant scholarly attention, Bengal remains underrepresented. Consequently, Muslim women's personal experiences of structural, invisible, and cumulative violence are poorly documented, leaving a critical gap in historical understanding.

Muslim women in Bengal are often portrayed as symbolic representatives of their communities, with state and policy narratives reinforcing this symbolic framing. Reports like the Sachar Committee Report (2006) reduce complex lived experiences to socio-economic indicators such as literacy and workforce participation. Roy (2016) observes that official discourse often assumes a Hindu middle-class woman as the normative citizen, framing Muslim women as deviations.

Despite these constraints, women assert agency through subtle, strategic practices: engagement with Islamic reform networks, participation in microfinance schemes, and involvement in community-based projects (Stadlen, 2018). These acts of everyday resistance highlight agency embedded in mundane practices rather than dramatic defiance. Intersectional analyses further reveal that identity is shaped by class, caste, region, and generational status (Jeffery & Qureshi, 2022).

Religious and legal frameworks intersect to shape the experiences of Muslim women in India. Muslim Personal Law, as studied by Singh (1992) and Siddiqui (1987), often reinforces patriarchal hierarchies, restricting women's autonomy in marriage, inheritance, and divorce. Engineer (1985) highlights the broader social and religious context, showing how entrenched patriarchal norms, mediated through community leaders and religious interpretation, sustain gendered subordination.

Mukrram Ahmed (2008) critiques the coexistence of religious and secular legal systems, exposing conflicts that hinder reform and limit opportunities for gender equality. These frameworks collectively produce complex terrains of oppression, where institutional, social, and religious dimensions intersect to constrain women's agency.

Structural violence offers a lens for understanding systemic, often unseen mechanisms sustaining women's marginalization. Sinha et al. (2017) highlight how political and economic structures disadvantage minority women, compounding harm through institutional neglect. Khan (2014) extends this to South Asian contexts, demonstrating that violence is embedded in

caste, class, and religious hierarchies. Dey (2019) advocates an intersectional approach, emphasizing that mainstream feminist frameworks often overlook the influence of religion and ethnicity, rendering Muslim women's experiences invisible or misinterpreted. Education is a critical avenue for empowerment. Menon (1981) and Chatterjee (2015) show that education fosters autonomy and challenges patriarchal norms, yet institutional biases and socio-economic constraints limit access for Muslim women. Hamzeh (2011) illustrates how religious expression, such as wearing the hijab, interacts with educational participation, symbolizing broader negotiations of identity, agency, and community norms. Ahmad (2001) emphasizes culturally sensitive educational policies to foster empowerment while recognizing community-specific constraints.

Silence functions as both survival and resistance. Historical erasures of sexual violence during Partition (Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Butalia, 1998) illustrate deliberate silencing, a pattern that persists in contemporary contexts (Desai, 2016; Datta, 2012). Silence may protect individuals from retaliation while simultaneously acting as a form of subaltern agency, challenging narratives imposed by the state or society. Spivak's (1988) question, "Can the subaltern speak?" underscores the need to recognize silence as a deliberate, empowering tactic rather than passivity. Bengal's communal landscape is shaped by migration, border dynamics, and historical syncretic traditions (Chatterji, 2007; Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2003). Incidents like the Hooghly riots (1964) and Bhagalpur aftermath (1989), alongside NRC-CAA debates, illustrate ongoing vulnerabilities, including displacement, harassment, and social exclusion. Government reports (Sachar Committee, 2006; National Commission on Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007; Kundu Report, 2015) document disparities but often fail to capture everyday lived experiences. Ethnographic approaches are necessary to reveal the subtle, cumulative, and invisible forms of violence.

### **Research Gaps**

Despite quantitative data and historical studies, qualitative and ethnographic research on Muslim women in West Bengal is limited. Existing literature emphasizes macro-level patterns, urban populations, or dramatic events, overlooking the everyday, accumulative harms. Intersectional analyses remain sparse, particularly concerning rural and semi-urban areas, the interaction of caste, class, and religion, and the role of institutions in perpetuating structural violence. This study addresses these gaps through feminist ethnography, long-term fieldwork, and narrative methods, capturing women's own accounts of exclusion, resistance, and identity negotiation

## **Research Objectives and Questions:**

### **Objectives:**

- 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:**

1. How does historical framing of the “Muslim women question” shape structural violence in West Bengal?
2. How do Muslim women’s lived experiences reshape regional social dynamics?
3. How does violence persist in invisible, accumulative forms, and how do intersecting identities reinforce it?
4. How can invisible violence be conceptualized through women’s narratives 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:**

The study draws on structural violence (Galtung, 1969), symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2000), everyday violence (Das, 2007), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). These frameworks illuminate the interaction of historical, socio-political, and institutional mechanisms with gendered experiences. AIV extends these perspectives by emphasizing the cumulative and invisible character of structural harm, moving beyond event-oriented approaches to recognize gradual, normalized, and systemic forms of oppression.

Intersectionality enables nuanced analysis of identity, revealing how religion, gender, caste, and class converge to produce distinct vulnerabilities. Lived experience forms the methodological core, ensuring that narratives of Muslim women are central to theorizing violence, agency, and resistance.

**Significance of the Study:**

This thesis contributes to feminist political ethnography, violence studies, and South Asian social history by:

- Conceptually advancing Accumulative Invisible Violence as a framework for understanding subtle, cumulative harm.
- Centering Muslim women's lived experiences, moving beyond statistics or macro-level studies.
- Revealing how historical, legal, religious, and social structures intersect to sustain marginalization.
- Offering empirical insights for policy interventions, education, and community-based empowerment programs.

**Methodology:****Ethnographic Approach**

The study employs feminist ethnography, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, walking interviews, and photo elicitation. This approach ensures that women's voices are central, and that the everyday textures of violence—from moral policing to bureaucratic neglect—are documented.

**Sampling**

Purposive sampling ensures representation across age, marital status, educational background, and socio-economic status. Interviews span rural, semi-urban, and urban contexts, capturing spatial and social variations in experiences of violence.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), is applied to extract patterns of invisible and accumulative violence. Intersectional coding identifies how religion, class, and gender intersect to produce structural marginalization.

**Ethical Considerations**

Given the sensitive nature of the study, strict confidentiality, consent, and emotional support protocols are followed. Reflexivity is maintained to address positionality and researcher bias.

**Chapter Summarisation:****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 & Policy Recommendations**

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.

### **Key Findings:**

The findings revealed a recurring pattern: Muslim women were frequently led to believe that the limitations placed on them were normal, unavoidable, or even self-inflicted. This normalization was brought about by subtle but enduring structural barriers, such as:

- Physical violence is not always the most apparent form; it can be subtle, concealed, and woven into everyday activities over time.
- It is commonly assumed by Muslim women that the limitations placed on their lives are typical, inescapable, or of their own choosing.
- Women empowerment does not alone dissolve patriarchy.
- Bureaucratic barriers to welfare programs that make people feel helpless rather than entitled (ration cards, Aadhaar, welfare benefits) continue to quietly perpetuate poverty and dependency.
- This type of invisible and covert forms of violence is unique in its capacity to take place without a discernible perpetrator, thereby making it more challenging to identify or counter.
- Muslim families are confined to underprivileged neighbourhoods due to housing discrimination, thereby perpetuating spatial exclusion.
- Institutional bias in workplaces and schools that restricts access to high-quality education and employment opportunities, portraying poverty and underemployment as individual shortcomings rather than systemic problems.
- Public areas and transportation are inherently unpleasant or inhospitable, people may believe that remaining home, or travelling with family member is the only "safe" course of action.

- What sets this form of violence apart is its ability to occur without a visible perpetrator being present. In contrast to direct state repression, which is often swiftly condemned, this form of exclusion is deeply ingrained in everyday routines, policies, and ostensibly neutral administrative choice.
- The research findings reveal that violence against Muslim women does not represent a rare or coincidental event, but rather an integral and deeply ingrained aspect of their experience.
- The confluence of gender, faith, and socioeconomic status creates a unique experience of marginalization that can only be fully addressed through multifaceted policies.
- This research's findings emphasize the need for an intersectional methodology that goes beyond superficial examination, instead focusing on the underlying systems that perpetuate marginalization.

This study advances broader discussions on structural violence by critically examining the findings, showing that significant social change necessitates dismantling interconnected networks of exclusion rather than merely addressing their manifestations.

**Hypothesis:**

- The violence in the lives of the Muslim women has been normalised, rendered routine that it often escapes public recognition.
- Muslim women are doubly marginalised, confronting patriarchal control internally and as Muslims within a majoritarian political order.

**Contributions:**

- The AIV framework will advance conceptual understanding of structural and everyday violence.
- Ethnographic insights will center subaltern voices, addressing historical and contemporary erasures.
- Findings may inform policy, education, and community interventions tailored to marginalized Muslim women in Bengal.
- The study will enrich intersectional feminist scholarship, situating South Asian minority women's experiences within global discourses on invisible and cumulative violence.

**Conclusion:**

This research addresses a critical gap in South Asian feminist studies by examining invisible, accumulative violence experienced by Muslim women in West Bengal. By integrating historical context, socio-cultural analysis, feminist theory, and ethnographic methodology, the study foregrounds lived experience as the primary lens to understand structural marginalization. It highlights the persistence of subtle, everyday harms that cumulatively undermine agency, dignity, and social belonging, offering both theoretical innovation and practical relevance.

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