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Hindu and Muslim women's everyday relations and agency: Gender and the *Ganga-Jamni tehzib* in Jaipur

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SYNOPSIS

Multireligious syncretism in cities is chiefly upheld by the engagements of everyday life where enduring bonds are formed and sustained. This article studies the feminised dimensions of the 'everyday' in the home and neighbourhood of Jaipur city in India, which it sees as spaces of everyday activities and encounters between communities in multireligious Indian cities. Women's mutual engagements and agency in these spaces are vital to support cohesive multireligious community development in Indian cities. However, patriarchal political Hindu injunctions against Hindu women engaging with the 'Muslim other' are strong, and they consciously and/or subconsciously influence the degree to which Hindu women allow themselves to engage with Muslim women in everyday interactions. It concludes that feminised multi-faith engagement is vital for communal peace and stability, and must be consciously invoked for community development in Indian cities.

Introduction

Religion is a critical socio-cultural and political force that determines the lived experiences of people in non-Western cultures (Witte & Green, 2013). In India, harmonious relations between diverse religious groups have a demonstrable impact on the overall flourishing of individuals and communities, even in ostensibly secular urban spaces. The precolonial north Indian cities of the Mughal era where Hindu–Muslim trade and cultural relations flourished, for instance, were prosperous, peaceful and among the great global capitals of the time (Freitag, 2006). Equally, sectarian violence between religious communities can lead to urban problems like spatial segregation. Religious minorities who fear for their safety might cluster spatially together, intensifying their poverty (Gayer & Jaffrelot, 2012; Sachar Commission Report, 2006). Notably, sectarian relations in multireligious cities are also enacted in the private spaces of the home, and in the semi-private spaces of the immediate neighbourhood (Ring, 2006). The home and the neighbourhood are sites of 'everyday' encounters that can be invited and/or spontaneous, and in pluralistic cities, are significant locations of multireligious syncretism.

This article privileges an explicitly feminised dimension of everyday relations between multi-faith communities, and argues that women's everyday relations and encounters in these spaces with women belonging to other communities have implications for the making of cohesive and stable multireligious cities. It argues that patriarchal political Hindu injunctions against engaging with the 'Muslim other', which are strong in Jaipur, directly and/or indirectly influence the degree to which Hindu women allow themselves to engage with Muslim women in everyday interactions. Since colonial times, the erosion of relations between Hindu and Muslim women in the home and neighbourhood has been deployed by Hindu nationalist parties as a significant strategy to assert power. In the last twenty years since the liberalisation of the Indian economy, efforts to safeguard the purity of the 'Hindu nation' have redoubled. Hindu women's status and agency in these spaces are often overtly or covertly determined by opportunistic nationalist politics. To keep aflame communal tensions in the public space, fundamentalist interpretations and nationalist parties have exploited religion to regulate women's activities and engagement in the private space of the home. These interventions include placing conditions and restrictions on Hindu women's everyday engagements with the broader multireligious community, which usually occur in the home and neighbourhood.

Gendered communal 'everyday' relations in the private space: implications for the public space

Gendered geometries of power and privilege are enacted in the private and semi-private spaces of the 'home' and 'neighbourhood' through categories such as 'religion' and the 'everyday'. Space is a complex concept, often differentially layered in praxis and policy, and subject to economic or political influences, changes to the natural environment, and migration. Conceptual bifurcations such as public/private are insufficient to understand how women encounter space in their everyday life, which is determined by social relations *between* women, including feminised inter-religious relations (Abraham, 2010). A vibrant assemblage of physical and affective factors may constitute these spaces for women.

Theodori and Luloff (2000) analyse the 'home' in terms of 'feeling' (at home, or the sense of emotional comfort and security); and a reluctance to live elsewhere, especially because of the investment in the neighbourhood community. Home, the smallest nucleus of the

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community, refers to the 'ownership [of property] and family life and happiness' (Lewicka, 2011, 211). The home, thus, connotes a wide scale of places ranging from the physical dwelling to the neighbourhood (even the city or the country) (Lewicka, 2011). In this article, the home refers to the physical unit/property, a private space wherein exclusivity or inclusivity of the broader community beyond the family is the prerogative of the family itself.

A neighbourhood can be understood as a 'district forming a community within a town or city, where inhabitants recognise each other by sight' (Mayhew, 2009), and which may have its own subculture based on local histories, traditions and memories. In rural communities and modern cities alike, these subcultures emerge from histories and traditions of neighbourliness and mutual engagement, and are often feminised, drawing substantially from women's 'socially ascribed role' as carers at home (Escalante & Valdivia, 2015, 114). The home is connected to other homes and is embedded in the neighbourhood through shared spaces such as stairwells, common gardens, community shops and parks, laneway temples, even shared taps and other amenities. Women constantly tread the blurry lines between these private and semi-private spaces as they negotiate the course and activities of their everyday. This everyday is the reflection of the daily realities of women's lives, where the crux of their agency is located.

Women's everyday engagements, roles and rights in the private spaces in South Asian cities illumine the home as the location of significant, albeit subtle, struggles for women's agency, which can be interpreted as political activism (Takhar, 2011). Indeed, the home is an 'inviolate site' for the preservation of Hindu culture for Hindu nationalists (Raju, 2006) where 'women's chastity' must be maintained (Sarkar, 2001). Women are often more bound to the home space, which makes it a vital political space for emancipation (Sarkar, 2001). As Purcell (2012, 273) writes, 'in any everyday activity lies an abundance of opportunities for ordinary people to subvert the rituals and representations that institutions seek to impose upon them: in effect, to remake part of the world in their personal interest.'

Likewise, the semi-private spaces of the neighbourhood in old cities are sites of access, encounter and agency for women. These comprise numerous sites of everyday interest to women such as temples, shops, the areas in front of their homes, shared courtyards and other common spaces between households, and other residences (Ring, 2006). Feminisation of space occurs through the feminisation of temporality. During the day, the temples in the old precincts (and even in the newer city areas), as well the neighbourhood spaces are significantly feminised zones (Narayanan, 2015) as the menfolk are away at the workplace.

In the home and neighbourhood spaces of South Asian cities, religion exerts a complicated influence on women that can be simultaneously empowering and problematic (Hancock, 1999; Kent, 2013). These spaces are sites of everyday religiosity, and enactment of everyday religious rituals. Religiosity in these spaces offers an often irreplaceable social opportunity for participation, engagement and bonding, even between women of different faiths (Ring, 2006). Religion and religious rituals can provide the vocabulary, context and comfort zone for women's sense of self, place and identity, and enable powerful feminised and feminist spaces.

The 'lived reality' of space demonstrates that just as women's activities in the public spaces in South Asia are regulated, their everyday engagements and encounters with others in the private spaces of the home and neighbourhood are also controlled (Hancock, 1999; Ring, 2006; Takhar, 2011). While the home is a site where encounters are enacted at the discretion of the residents, patriarchal frameworks may significantly limit women in their capacity to invite such interactions.

Fostering encounters through 'intercultural dialogue' is a noted way of strengthening multicultural communities. Michael (2012, 17) writes that 'a dialogue-centred approach is premised on deeper levels of individual and collective self-examination, and a willingness to abandon, or at least suspend impulses, judgements, and presuppositions that underpin caricatures of the "other"'. Placing religion prominently as a dimension of intercultural dialogue can greatly enhance positive perceptions of identities in a pluralistic society, by simultaneously enriching dialogue at political and personal levels (Michael, 2012).

These approaches have been strategically used by community development practitioners to facilitate women's engagement for communal peace in neighbourhood spaces of the city. C. Rajeswari Raja (2003) points to the work of the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI), an organisation concerned with promoting inter-religious peace in India as an example of strategic feminised community engagement through the use of religion. In the aftermath of heavy communal rioting in the walled city of Old Hyderabad following the Godhra carnage in Gujarat in 2003, the HMI solicited the cooperation of Hindu and Muslim women residents across the caste spectrum to come together in common areas, and engage in reconciliation and trust-(re)building through dialogue. Women were encouraged in feminised spaces to articulate their personal, family and community needs, which unsurprisingly are common across the religious divide. HMI also believed that functional and engaged relations between women of multiple faiths were essential to healing, reconciliation and better Hindu-Muslim relations. Rajeswari Raja writes (2003, 122):

> "HMI's community development programs are, therefore, aimed at involving communities — and especially the Hindu and Muslim women in those communities — in grassroots work, with local participation and leadership, to improve the quality of life based on the expressed local needs. The projects initially targeted women specifically as it was felt that women could promote healing and reconciliation across ethnic divides more effectively. By empowering the women in the local communities to effect change HMI hoped to encourage attitudinal changes and to broaden both women's and men's efforts at building a peaceful society in which they all could live."

Of course, it is not necessarily the case 'that religious institutions as currently structured provide a pathway for amelioration of women's unequal status' (Seguino, 2011, 1317). Indeed, the drawbacks to gender-equity are likely greater through the interventions of religious beliefs, than any benefits to women. The Hindutva nationalist narrative in India has identified the Hindu woman's role in the home as vital to safeguarding the 'Hindu nation' in multireligious India. To achieve this, both the *Ganga-Jamni tehzib* and Hindu women's agency — including their ability to engage with women of other faiths — have to be weakened. The next section examines the impact of the patriarchal Hindutva that regulates Hindu women's private lives in Old Jaipur, and its implications for feminised inter-faith community engagement in multireligious cities.

Hindutva's regulation of multireligious engagement: consequences for women and development

Identities in India are splintered across complex communal, caste, gender, linguistic, regional and other factors, of which religion is only *one* element. It is nonetheless one of the most significant and positive factors in mediating neighbourliness amid such diversity. Datta (2009) refers to a 'mongrel' cosmopolitanism that underpins social relations where neighbourliness is defined by secularism, which explicitly relies on diverse religious, regional and caste identities. Empirically, the active surmounting/negation of these identity differences can achieve cohesiveness and unity. Equally, when religious identity politics divide multi-faith communities, urban life can become unstable and even volatile.

The growing and pervasive influence of religious nationalism — in this case, politicised Hinduism — over inclusive secular debates in India threatens the capacity of multi-faith groups to contribute to discussions on identity politics, rights and representation. By reducing