Difference in Memory

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Everyone lives in a story . . . because stories are all there is to live in, it was just a question of which one you chose . . . (Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*)[1]

INTRODUCTION

The study of popular memory is necessarily relational. It involves the exploration of two sets of relations: (1) that between dominant memory and oppositional forms across the public field, including academic productions; and (2) the relation between public discourse and a more privatized sense of the past generated within lived culture.[2] This paper is concerned with the second of these two constitutive relations in the study of popular memory—the often vexed but close linkages between public constructions and private reminiscences.

The project began with what seemed to be a simple question: what might we learn about the final decades of colonial rule in Bengal, and especially about

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[1] Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 182.

[2] Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routlege, 1998), 75–86.

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the changing lives of urban Muslims, by approaching them through the memories of Muslim women—an archive that has rarely made its appearance within dominant historiographies of that era. I was especially interested in tracking the resonances, if any, that constructions of Muslim-ness—normalized within both British and Hindu nationalist discourses in the late colonial period—might have had in the lives of middle class Muslims in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal. What were their conceptions of processes of "change" at work at that time? How did Muslim women perceive themselves, and in what terms?

The oral testimonies I gathered, mostly from middle class Bengali Muslim women who were born and lived in Calcutta or Dhaka between 1910 and 1950, and a few from middle class Bengali Hindu women, led me to a set of additional questions that animate the following analysis: What do Muslim women remember of that time? What do they (choose to) narrate today, and in what terms? What do they highlight, and what do they elide? Does the act of remembering itself mediate in their presentation and production of themselves as subjects? And how might the dialogic context(s) in which the oral histories were generated—both in terms of the larger political environment of the subcontinent in the 1990s and the more immediate setting of the interview situation—shape the contours of their recollections, as well as the narratives that follow from them?

A HISTORY OF DIFFERENCE?

Histories of non-hegemonic groups are often conceived as recuperative projects through which normative history is challenged, and its oversights, resulting from a supposed crisis of vision, are corrected; the intent, stated explicitly or not, is to make visible (heard) the previously unseen (unheard). Since official discourses are typically "state-managed,"[3] the task of the critical historian is thought to be to unearth "what the colonial state—and often the nationalist bourgeoisie—once chose to forget."[4] In this context, memory, especially popular memory, has come to be increasingly important as an alternative, oppositional archive that allows access to "untold stories" of a "real past" that can presumably be tapped into by simply posing the right questions.[5]

This paper differs from such projects of recuperation in two important ways. First, it begins with the premise that personal memories are not easily separable from the structures of representation of official history. As oral

[3] Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[4] Ann L. Stoler and Karen Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (Jan. 2000), 7–8.

[5] Stoler and Strassler call this the "hydraulic model," in which memory is treated as "a repository of alternative histories and subaltern truths" (Stoler and Strassler, "Castings," 7).

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historians have pointed out, dominant historical discourses often "supply the very terms by which a private history is thought through."[6] This paper, thus, resists the idea of recovering unmediated subaltern truths.

Second, it rests on the argument that memories are not simply sources of hitherto unknown information, but "problematic sites of query in themselves" that require critical scrutiny. As Ann L. Stoler and Karen Strassler put it, "Subaltern acts of remembering have not been in question because it is official memory that is on the line; the process of remembering and the fashioning of personal memories are often beside the political points being made, and may in fact be seen to work against them."[7]

I also shy away from the assumption (or is it desire?) that narratives of the previously marginalized necessarily embody "trenchant political critiques" of the dominant order—an assumption that exempts categories such narratives use and the contexts in which they are invoked from closer scrutiny. As Luisa Passerini has argued, it is not enough to simply encourage or enable members of an oppressed group to "speak for themselves."[8] While projects of recovery record the existence of different groups, they do not further our understanding of how different conceptions of selves/groups are produced in the first place. To quote Joan W. Scott, "The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world …. [The] project of making history visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, [and] its categories of representation … as fixed immutable identities."[9]

The aim of this paper is, therefore, not to simply record *what* Muslim women say, but to also note *how* they say it, and to what possible end. Accordingly, it seeks to "arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within an historical" account,[10] and to reflect critically on what such "remembering does for the present," as much as what it tells us about the past.[11] In other words, I am as concerned here

[6] Popular Memory Group 1998, 78. See also Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routlege, 1998), 53–62.

[7] Stoler and Strassler, "Castings," 4.

[8] Passerini, "Work Ideology," 53–62.

[9] Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991), 777–78.

[10] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 117. Also see Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 104–25. See also Stoler and Strassler, "Castings," 4–48.

[11] Stoler and Strassler of course caution against reducing "acts of remembering … to transparencies about the making of the self" ("Castings," 8–9).

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with what I read as the interviewees' desire to be seen in particular ways as I am with the substantive facts that emerge about the lives of middle class Muslim women in early twentieth-century Bengal.

The paper mainly draws on the oral histories of four Muslim women, with brief references to conversations with three others. They were collected during my field trips to Calcutta and Dhaka between 1996 and 2000. Of the seven women, Jahan Ara Begum, Zohra Sultana, Mumtaz Waheeda, Meherunnessa Begum, and Nusreen Begum were still living in Calcutta at the time. Nusrat Begum and Sufia Kamal had spent part of their early lives in Calcutta but moved to Dhaka after the Partition. I also quote here from conversations with five Hindu women: of them, Angana Mitra was born in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), and the others, Ila Chatterjee, Nandita Sinha, Chaitali Bose, and Purnima Ganguly, were born and spent most of their lives in Calcutta.[12]

The interviews were conducted mostly in the homes of the speakers, typically over the course of two to four meetings.[13] The two main languages used were Bengali and English, although Urdu,[14] and to a lesser extent Sanskrit, were freely intermixed in some conversations. The simultaneous use of two or three languages, and the heteroglossia[15] it produces, is quite common in the everyday speech of the urban middle classes in Calcutta and, at least in my experience, in Dhaka. Of the women quoted below, Zohra Sultana, Nusreen Begum, and Mumtaz Waheeda would typically use more English than the others. The excerpts from their testimonies, therefore, contain large sections in the original English. In my translations I have gene rally tried to stay as close to the original Bengali speech as possible. Sometimes I also include the Bengali/Urdu phrases used by the speakers to compensate for losses in meaning and affect that translation so often seems to incur.

Substantively, the interviewees were asked about their childhood, experiences in school, their friends, neighbors, and social activities, and their memories of their mothers and other women of both their own and previous generations. I asked also about the relationships between different generations, as well as those between men and women within each generation.

[12] I have used pseudonyms for all the interviewees, with the exception of the late Begum Sufia Kamal, a well-known and respected literary figure in both Bangladesh and West Bengal.

[13] The meetings with Nusrat Begum, which took place in her office in old Dhaka, were exceptions to this rule. Also, I met with Purnima Ganguly, Chaitali Bose, and Angana Mitra only once at a gathering at Jahan Ara Begum's house.

[14] While I do not read the Arabic script of written Urdu, I have a working knowledge of the language in its everyday spoken form, which overlaps to a certain extent with commonly used Hindi. My first language is Bengali, and I also understand some Sanskrit.

[15] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holoquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 56; Bruce Mannheim and Dennis Tedlock, "Introduction," in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, ed. D. Tedlock and B. Mannheim (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 1–32.

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Within this loosely defined set of concerns, the interviews remained mostly unstructured, with the speakers deciding what they wished to recount. While the direct quotes used in this paper come mostly from taped interviews, in my analysis I also draw on notes that I typically took soon after recording each testimony.[16]

CONTEXT

In 1871, W. W. Hunter published his influential book *The Indian Mussalman*, in which he proposed that there were two kinds of Muslims in India: the foreign-born aristocratic *ashraf* (elite) and the fanatical masses of jihad-seeking *atrap* ('low caste Hindu' converts), who formed the majority of Muslims in the subcontinent.[17] Hunter's description of both "indigenous Muslims" who were inherently hostile to British rule, and neglected Mughal elites resonated well with the colonial administration's calcifying position on the essential inferiority, backwardness, and treachery of "Indians" on one hand, and its interest in keeping the Muslim elite distant from an increasingly nationalistic Hindu middle class on the other.

Muslims were, of course, far more divided along class and caste lines, as well as political interests, than Hunter's simplistic binary formulation would suggest.[18] In nineteenth-century Bengal, revivalist-reformist movements such as the *Faraizi* and the *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya* often combined explicit attempts at purification of the practice of Islam with socio-economic programmes, and they drew most of their support from the poorest and most exploited peasants. As Rafiuddin Ahmed has pointed out, by the very nature of their propaganda, these movements alienated not just wealthy landlords but also small landholders, merchants, and moneylenders, not to mention urban educated Muslims. In the end, the actual number of so-called 'reformed' Muslims—Hunter's "fanatical masses"—amounted to little more than a small fraction of the total Muslim population of Bengal.[19] Indeed, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, militant impulses had given way to more moderate forms of "reform from within" among Bengali Muslims. The reforms that most educated urban Muslims supported were, in fact, invested in reconciling

[16] I did not use the tape recorder for my short meetings with Nusreen Begum and Nandita Sinha. The description of my interactions with Purnima Ganguly, Chaitali Bose, and Angana Mitra at Jahan Ara Begum's house is based entirely on my notes taken on the evening of the meeting.

[17] "Jihad" here means holy war.

[18] Hunter's work was not representative of the situation of Muslims outside of East Bengal, but the administration used his work as such. Aparna Basu, *The Growth of Education and Political Development in India, 1898–1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[19] Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871–1906: The Quest for Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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a revival of the ancient "glory of Islam" with a "modern spirit" and "cooperation with the west."[20]

The publication of the settlement and census reports by the colonial government in 1872, which claimed that a majority of the Muslims in Bengal were of indigenous origin, were thus greeted with strenuous protest, especially by educated urban Muslims who, by all accounts, did not wish to be associated with the dominant British view of "Indians" in general, and "low-caste/class" Muslim converts in particular. Consequently, by the end of the nineteenth century, many lower or middle class Muslims in Bengal were busy reinventing themselves as "foreign-born" *ashrafs*, in an attempt to escape the twin derogatory labels of "originally low-born" and "originally Hindu" (and hence somehow inauthentic) Muslims. The sharp increase in the 1901 census in the number of Shaikhs, Syeds, Mughals, and Pathans—the respectable social groups—and the corresponding decrease in the ranks of the occupational caste groups, give a poignant testimony to this episode in identity formation among Muslims in Bengal in the face of British categorizations in the late nineteenth century.[21]

Derogatory representations of Muslims were, of course, not the sole preserve of the British in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal; such ideas had also slipped effortlessly, it would seem, into the writings of Hindus. The vitriolic rhetoric of the Hindu Right since the 1920s, which has systematically depicted Muslims variously, as "foreign invaders," "ex-Hindu converts," "traitors," and "abductors," has been amply documented.[22] However, the wide circulation of similar ideas as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century among ostensibly "liberal" Hindus, even women, has received relatively sparse attention.[23]

As we shall see in what follows, elements of these dominant representations continue to haunt Bengali Muslim women's constructions of Muslim-ness. Consequently, even the most private stories of Muslim women seem fraught with tensions, as they both try to set the record straight, as it were, about Muslim men, and criticize male privilege from their own complex subject positions as women and as Muslims in contemporary India. The categories of dominant history are, thus, simultaneously constitutive of and challenged by these oral accounts of a time before the Partition, recollected over half a century later.

[20] Ibid., 95.
[21] Ibid., 113–15.
[22] For a recent discussion of the Hindu communal offensive against Muslims in the 1920s, see Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. 148–237. See also Paola Bacchetta, "Communal Property/Sexual Property: On Representations of Muslim Women in a Hindu Nationalist Discourse," in *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State*, ed. Zoya Hassan (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994), 193.
[23] Mahua Sarkar, "Muslim Women and the Politics of (In)visibility in Late Colonial Bengal," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 14, 2 (June 2001), 226–50.

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DIFFICULT VOICES

It is possible to identify several recurrent themes in these oral accounts. In this paper, I will concentrate on three overwhelming concerns that emerge in almost every story: the labels of Muslims as foreign-invaders/traitors, Muslims as backward or conservative, and Muslims as "originally low-caste" Hindus. The paper ends with a brief exploration of yet another casting for Muslims—as "no different from us (Hindus)"—one that is not ostensibly derogatory, but can nonetheless pose its own set of contradictions for Muslims.

Muslim or Indian (Bengali)

My name is Jahan Ara. . . . Our family has always been very Bengali . . . My friends who came to the house always commented on that. And yet, because of our names we often had to face the question: "Are you Bengali?" By religion [we are] Muslim . . . I was born in 1939. Within about seven years of that India became independent . . ..[24] My parents were nationalist Muslims . . ..[25]

The area in which we were staying in—Park Circus[26]—was very nice . . . Muslim government *besh bhalo bhalo* [respectable, well to do, in high positions] officials lived there . . . [Most] of them sent their kids to good schools. But when we went to school . . . it was just before independence, right? [At that time], there was a different consciousness [awakening, "*jagaran*"] among people. They did not feel that it was necessary to send their children to English-medium schools. Unlike today, when you take it for granted that good education means instruction in English . . . it was not like that then. So my sister and I were sent to a school that was *Brahmo* . . ..

Q: What was the name of the school?

. . . Victoria Institution. It was in . . . North Calcutta . . . In that school, perhaps because it was Brahmo, there were . . . unlike now . . . you could find at least four or five Mussalman girls in each class . . . among every thirty or so girls. The school itself was not big . . . but there was some interaction between Muslims and Hindus at that time . . ..

From the very beginning of her life story, Jahan Ara seems to insist on both her family's Bengali-ness and their anti-colonial nationalist leanings. Given the tendency among the urban *ashraf* in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal to dissociate themselves from all things Bengali, and their studied distance from a nationalist movement spearheaded by the Hindu middle and upper middle classes, if not a downright pro-British stance, the establishment of an unambiguous Bengali identity is clearly important for the story of this "nationalist" Muslim[27] family. And yet, the

[24] The formal end of colonial rule in India.

[25] Muslims, who opposed the formation of Pakistan.

[26] Park Circus was popular among the growing body of middle and upper middle class Muslim professionals in the 1930s and 1940s. Many of the women I interviewed still live in Park Circus; others spent at least some years in this area.

[27] No equivalent term existed for Hindus. Nationalist Muslims were concerned not only with political unity with Hindus, but also with maintaining their own cultural and religious difference.

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allusions to her Persian name and the "difficulty" "some people" may have with it, and her religion, both situate her firmly within the larger moral/cultural universe of Islam, and establish almost immediately her "specific difference" from the Hindu *bhadralok*.[28] They also prepare us for the imminent staging of the tensions between her complex subject-position and her place within the Indian nation, whose troubled history makes its appearance even before her life story gets off the ground. Note also her attempt to establish early on her family's (upper) middle class status in this context, a concern we will revisit presently.

So we started our education. Then, when I was in class three or so, about seven-years old, the communal riots broke out in Calcutta . . ." the great killings . . .."[29]

During the riots and for a while afterwards . . . we were essentially confined to our neighborhood . . .. Afterward, after Partition when . . . the city was calm again, Leeladi[30] [the school principal] came to our house and told my father, "Give my girls back to me." So, we went back to Victoria—very glad to be back in our old school . . .. However, by that time, many of the Muslim middle class families had left for Pakistan, so the number of Muslim students in the school fell drastically . . ..

Zohra Sultana, born in Calcutta in 1938, is also forthright in asserting her Bengali-ness, but in her case it appears firmly ensconced within a more self-conscious identification with the Indian nation: "My first identity is that I am an Indian Bengali, and my religion happens to be Islam . . .. My father gave us such a broad outlook that we were not prepared for community living with Muslims. Rather I would say that we were more at ease with a more international community or with broader [*sic*] people without any set ideas . . .."[31]

Zohra, too, seems to anticipate the inevitable intrusion of the nation's history into her story. But unlike Jahan Ara, who asserts her religious/cultural ties to Islam, Zohra deliberately downplays them, preferring instead a modernist, even cosmopolitan, casting for herself and her family. However, I would suggest that her confession about feeling more "at ease" with an "international community" signals more than a discomfort with "community-living with Muslims." With the political success of the Hindu Right in recent years, ideas about the inherent foreignness and, hence, the disloyalty and treacherousness of Muslims have become something of a commonplace in popular discourse among large sections of Hindus. Zohra's privileging of her "Indian" and "Bengali" identifications and her attempt to downplay her religious affiliation by making it sound like happenstance—"my religion

See Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 258–59.

[28] Term used to refer to educated middle class Bengalis in general, but more likely to Hindus.

[29] The riots from 16–20 August 1946.

[30] Leela Bannerjee was the principal of Victoria School at that time. Jahan Ara describes her as "a very educated and accomplished woman in those days."

[31] Personal communication, Calcutta, 1996.

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happens to be Islam"—could, therefore, be a dialogic response to the increasingly communalized political discourse and a growing expressed intolerance of minorities in general, and Muslims in particular, in late 1990s India.

Sometimes the anxiety over the label "foreigner/anti-national" does not enter openly the narrative from the beginning, but the desire to establish Bengali-ness (and through it, indigenousness) as one of the definitive elements of one's identity still appears, betraying a certain tension. For instance, Meherunnessa Begum's paternal family came from outside Bengal, but she was quick to point out that the family had adjusted completely in Bengali society and considered themselves "totally Bengali": "My family came from Ahmedabad—my grandfather. But by settling here we have *become* Bengali [my emphasis]. We speak Bengali now . . . although I think I have an accent. *Hai na*? [Isn't it so?] My maternal grandfather [on the other hand] was converted to Islam—he was Bengali . . .."[32]

One set of recollections that provided a site for repeated enunciation of the theme of Muslim "loyalty to the nation" centered on riots. Here, I will quote extensively from the testimony of only Jahan Ara Begum to illustrate this point.[33] The recurrence of this theme of loyalty, the alacrity with which stories demonstrating the courage and integrity of Muslim men were sometimes offered up, and the coherence of these narratives suggest not only a desire to share these stories with a larger audience and to be seen through them, but also the likely existence of practices of remembering and narration quite outside of the context of the interview. It is also possible that at least some of the women I spoke to in Calcutta had assumed or decided that I—a Hindu woman born and brought up in that city not far from where many of them still live—would want to know and, perhaps, should hear about this shared history of strife, from their presumably different perspectives. So, for instance, when I asked Jahan Ara what she remembered of the riots that she had already mentioned on several occasions while recounting her childhood memories, she responded readily:

> Yes, I have some very vivid memories. There was a Hindu family near here . . . we saw them around. The man and his wife had just had a child . . .. When things got really serious, he came to my father and said, "Khan Saheb, my child was born after so many years, after so much effort. You must save my child!" I am not sure what I understood of the situation, since I was so young. Anyway, they came to our place at night.
>
> We were living in Park Circus itself, yes. So . . . my father told them, "Do not worry. As long as I am alive, the rioters cannot touch you." So late at night . . . there were these non-Bengali Muslims who had appeared in the neighborhood [*abangali Mussalmaneder paraye amdani hoyechhilo*[34]] . . . *We did not know them at all*. . .. Anyway, [the

[32] Personal communication, Meherunnessa Begum, Calcutta, 1996.

[33] For a more detailed treatment of the themes discussed in this paper see Mahua Sarkar, *Visible Histories/Disappearing Women* (forthcoming, Duke University Press).

[34] The phrase could translate as either "they were brought by someone," or simply "they had arrived." I use "appeared" to reflect the ambiguity in the Bengali phrase.

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non-Bengali newcomers] . . . came . . . and . . . woke [everyone] up. My father went out . . . and asked what the matter was. They said, "*amader kachhe khabor achhe* [We have news] that you have . . . [Hindus] in your house . . . *ber kore din, nahole* [send them out, or else] there will be a lot of trouble!" My father said, "I am sorry but I cannot give them up. You know that according to Islam it is a sin to deny protection to one's guests . . .. Before you do any harm to them, you have to kill . . . not just me . . . my wife, my children, and all other members of my family who are present here. If you can do that then only you can lay a finger on my guests." These people waited around, threatened us some more, but when they realized that there was no way they could convince my father, they left. So that night went by. The Hindu man was really scared; and frankly, my father was not at all sure that the rioters would not be back. So the next day, he contacted the police and made arrangements for that family to be shifted to a safe area.

At that time—you cannot possibly know this since this was long before your birth—the city was divided into pockets. This Park Circus region was Muslim; but if you went down the road toward Ballyganj,[35] once you came to the place where the Birla Mandir now stands, the area beyond that was a Hindu stronghold. So, if you were heading south, once they crossed what is the Modern Girl's School today, Hindus were safe; whereas, Muslims had nothing to fear on this side of that imaginary line. Anyway, they [the Hindu family] had some relatives in Bhabanipur[36], and they went to stay with them. There was another family like that . . .. But these families . . . after the riots were over and the Partition . . . never contacted us. My mother particularly was quite keen on finding out how these people were doing, especially the child . . . but they never let us know anything about how they were doing . . . nothing! By that time things had calmed down; some people who had left their homes during the riots came back, others came from East Bengal and took up residence in houses that were empty . . . but these families never felt any necessity to contact us after all that we went through together . . .. I think of this often, you know. I think if this were to happen to us today, we would go and express our thanks and gratitude for the kind of trouble, *risk* that my father had taken for them. Maybe they could not, for whatever reasons . . ..

Jahan Ara's story is of course invaluable in bringing alive for the listener (and hopefully, even in translation, for the reader) something of the fear and uncertainty that gripped Calcutta at that time, and "that imaginary line" between Hindu and Muslim areas which I, for one, have crossed a million times, without giving as much as a single thought to what that turn of the road might have signified not so long ago. The story also challenges the overwhelming representation of Muslim men as both violent and treacherous in popular Hindu discourse through its powerful evocation of the picture of Khan Saheb confronting the rioters, even as it acknowledges both the verity of Muslim violence towards Hindus, and subtly displaces that destructive agency on to Muslims from "outside Bengal." But what is perhaps most striking about this story is the acute sense of disappointment, even betrayal, which creeps in by the end of Jahan Ara's telling of it—a disappointment not easily apprehended without referring to the historical context in which the story

[35] An area south of Park Circus.
[36] An area southwest of Park Circus.

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locates itself. While a detailed account of pre-Partition communal politics is outside the scope of this study, a few lines about the immediate incident in question might be helpful.[37]

The riots Jahan Ara refers to broke out in August of 1946 in the wake of the Muslim League's call to "Direct Action to achieve Pakistan",[38] instigated both by its deep political differences with the Congress[39]—especially regarding the issue of parity of communal representation in any governing body—and the British administration's decision to move forward with the formation of an interim government at the national level without the League's cooperation, if necessary. While the day passed peacefully in the rest of the country, in Calcutta it precipitated vicious rioting involving Muslims and Hindus that resulted in almost 10,000 deaths in the course of a few days. As one recent analysis has suggested, it is widely believed that the violence could have been contained much earlier, if not prevented altogether, but for the negligence of both the ruling League government and the British administration in Bengal, which refused to heed the signs of imminent rioting.[40] To quote one scholar:

> Muslim *goondas* [hooligans]from outside Calcutta armed with sticks, spears and daggers began to appear in ... the city ... [On the other hand, that] Hindus were well prepared for violence is indicated by their ready retaliation of attacks by Muslim League processionists as they passed Hindu localities on the morning of 16 August, and the fact that there were eventually more Muslim than Hindu casualties in Calcutta."[41]

Whatever the reasons behind the riot of August 1946, it left an indelible mark on the timbre of future communal discourse in the city, and indeed the subcontinent. It came to thematize all that Hindus feared and resented Muslim rule for—even as they actively colluded in realizing that nightmare—and further strengthened the Muslim League's demand for a separate nation by making the coexistence of Muslims and Hindus seem impossible. It is in the light of this history that the complex texture of Jahan Ara's story of her father's courage, and her disappointment with her Hindu neighbors, becomes visible.

[37] See, Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India: 1936–1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 181–87; Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885–1930* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1994); David Page, *Prelude to Partition: The Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control, 1920–1932* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also Datta, *Carving Blocs*.

[38] League resolution of 29 July 1946, 138–39, quoted in Singh, *The Origins*, 181.

[39] Hindu dominated but also represented non-League and nationalist Muslims, and other minorities such as the Sikhs and the Christians.

[40] *Report of the Commissioners of Police on the Disturbances of 16–20 August* (Calcutta, 1946), quoted in Richard Lambert, *Hindu-Muslim Riots* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1951), 170.

[41] Singh, *The Origins*, 182–83.

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For nationalist Muslims such as Jahan Ara's parents, who did not support the League's demand for Pakistan, the 1946 riots must have underscored the growing precariousness of their position vis-à-vis a League government, which had successfully garnered grass-roots support for its agenda during the preceding years.[42] One also begins to appreciate the extent of the risk that her father took in safeguarding his Hindu neighbors, especially since the rioters from "elsewhere" were not bound by any code of reciprocity to honor any social capital that Khan Saheb might have commanded in that neighborhood. But beyond the immediate implications, what the 1946 riot and the political success of the Bengal League government that underwrote it achieved was a systematic marginalization of nationalist Muslims and their hopes for a unified, secular India. In time, it resulted in a near total obfuscation of their efforts in the struggle for independence from British colonialism in the popular discourse of Hindu Bengalis. In my reading, it is this Hindu amnesia, or willed denial of acknowledgement, that feeds the sense of betrayal that Jahan Ara expresses so poignantly at the end of this story: "these families never … [contacted] us *after all that we went through together*." Note that since Jahan Ara herself was, by her own admission, quite young at that time, the sense of 'letdown' she gives voice to here is probably her parents', or something she experienced later in life. Yet, she presents it here as something that *she* felt, at *that* time, revealing the complex ways in which feelings are produced, maintained, even transferred through the practice of recollection within families, between generations, and even within the consciousness of a single person over time.

However, for Jahan Ara, the biggest disappointment seems to have come during the riots that erupted on 10 January 1964, in the wake of reports of communal violence in East Pakistan:

> [As] I said before … my father was a nationalist Mussalman. Consequently, we never thought of leaving India, or that *Bharatbarsha* [India] is not my country … after Partition … at least I never thought that personally. Now, there was a small riot in 1950 in Kolkata, but … after that for many years there were no riots in Kolkata city. [And then, in] 1964, there was again a riot! By then we were grown up. I remember that during the '64 riots … my ego took a blow … or something … .. I was probably really hurt. I felt that we should not stay in this country any longer … .. It is one thing that there were riots in Pakistan … that can happen. They declared themselves to be the nation of a specific community. But … [we] stayed here believing that we will all live here in our own rights! … Another blow from … [what we called our] own … really hurt me!

In stark contrast to the voices of Muslim women who (and/or whose families) opted to stay in India, the question of proving one's loyalty to

[42] Ibid., ix.

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the nation seems to be of little concern in the accounts of Muslim women who either migrated to East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) or grew up there, and now reside in Bangladesh. However, some of them who were already in their teens when they left Calcutta do remember the preoccupation with Bengali culture, language, and identity among middle class Muslims in pre-Partition Bengal. Nusrat Begum, for instance, spent much of her early life in Calcutta before migrating to East Pakistan in 1949. Nusrat personally knew many Muslim writers living in Calcutta in the 1930s and 1940s. As she remembers it, cultivation of Bengali was very important to "progressive" middle class Muslim intellectuals in Bengal at that time, although wealthy Muslim families still spoke Urdu at home.

By the 1950s, this preoccupation with Bengali identity among middle class Muslims in Bengal led, of course, to yet another full-fledged cultural nationalist movement in the subcontinent—between Urdu-speaking West Pakistan and Bengali dominated East Pakistan—which culminated in the formation of independent Bangladesh in 1971. Some of the women I spoke to in Bangladesh played crucial roles in that movement, while others were involved in less visible ways. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that women like Nusrat Begum in Bangladesh today talk about their national identity with an ease that, in my experience, is not easy to find among Muslim women in West Bengal.[43]

Muslims as Backward/Conservative

Nusrat's story does not escape disruption, but in her case it is not the "nation" and its demands for loyalty, but the history of "progress" itself, and liberal Muslim men as its agents, that overshadow her rather seamless presentation of her own story and that of other women in her life. Still, it is in this context of addressing the idea of Muslim conservatism that Muslim women are most visible in their own stories. It is also in these discussions that we encounter comparisons with Hindu women, and the most incisive, if reluctant, criticisms of Muslim men.

Much of Nusrat Begum's childhood memories seem to revolve around her father, then a prominent literary figure in Calcutta, and his work. She begins her story with her birth in East Bengal, but switches almost immediately to the lives of struggling writers in Calcutta: "My birth is on 4 June

[43] The question of Bengali identity may be more complicated in Bangladesh today than my analysis reflects. However, my current concerns are with colonial Bengal and postcolonial India. I feel neither qualified nor inclined to address the issue of identity politics—presumably around issues of adequate Bengali-ness—in contemporary Bangladesh. Suffice it to say, all of the women I spoke to in Bangladesh have families who have lived in one or another part of undivided Bengal for at least several generations, and that, at least in their conversations with me, they neither claimed nor betrayed (with one exception whom I do not quote here) other forms of ethnic identification.

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1925 . . . I was born in the village. My father used to live in Calcutta . . . [although] sometimes he would come to the village. At that time, Muslim writers, litterateurs, did not have much opportunity to live with their families because almost all of them lived amidst considerable financial difficulties in Calcutta . . . some in messes, some with friends . . .. [So they would leave] their families in the village [often in East Bengal]. Later, gradually, if and when they became relatively affluent, they would bring their families to live in Calcutta." At this point in the narrative, Nusrat abruptly declares:

I have a history [*amar ekta itihas achhe*] . . . in my childhood twice I almost drowned—once in the pond and another time in the canal. The second time . . . [I came very close to dying] . . .. When this news reached my father in Kolkata, he said "No, I will not keep them in the village any longer; my daughter will die." This is the preamble to my journey to Kolkata.

Q: When did you go there?

Probably I was about three- . . . years-old at that time . . .. My *baromama* [uncle] and my *dadi* and my *nani* [paternal and maternal grandmothers] . . . were very opposed to [our move to the city] . . . [But] my father wrote a *stern* letter to my uncle saying, "You will please bring my wife and my daughter within this and this date to Kolkata . . ." So then my uncle did not persist with his objections . . .. A huge borkha[44] was put on my mother, and I was carried by my uncle . . . we arrived at Shealdah station.[45] *Phaeton gari!*[46] . . . But seeing the size of the horse I almost died of fright. *Uribbaba*! *Eta abar ki cheez*! And the horse too in the last minute decided to neigh loudly! I hugged my uncle tightly . . . began to cry almost . . .. Anyway, we took the carriage . . . [to my father's house]. At that time, it was a rather busy and happening place. Qaji Nazrul Islam[47] was already there . . ..[48]

From the very beginning, then, Nusrat places her own life story firmly within the context of an increasingly vibrant literary and social reform movement initiated by a group of Muslim intellectuals in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal. Note also that in Nusrat's mind, her 'history' consists of her early childhood in the village apparently fraught with danger, a time that she clearly left behind when she came to Calcutta. One thus gets the sense that this narrative is not so much about the reunion of one family as about an encounter between the city and the village, between 'modernity' and 'progress,' on one hand, and 'tradition' posed as their antithesis, on the other.

[44] A veiling gown worn in public by women who observe *purdah*.

[45] A major train station in the heart of Calcutta.

[46] An uncovered four-wheeled horse-drawn carriage. *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary* (Calcutta: Shishu Sahitya Samsad, 1995).

[47] Qazi Nazrul Islam was one of the most respected Bengali poet-writers of the twentieth century.

[48] Nusrat Begum, Dhaka, 1996

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Nusrat's first memories of her father in his city home are uncomfortable ones. As her description below suggests, he was visibly annoyed, if not embarrassed, by Nusrat and her mother's rustic appearance:

My father immediately scolded my mother, 'What are you wearing? Like a ghost! Take it off!' Ma slowly took her *borkha* off, and said quietly, "How can I come without a cover?" . . . Baba said, "I do not ever want to see you wearing that thing in my presence again. Go! And what have you done to the child? . . . Pierced her nose, tied her hair tightly like that—how does it look?" So, I was taken inside the house [to be "fixed"] . . .. For a few days . . . I would not let him hold me . . . I was quite scared [of him. He looked strange] in his European clothes [*pant para*] . . .. I had seen very little of him until then . . .. [So] I would keep hugging my mother. Gradually, however, I became close to him . . . [and] would tag along wherever he went . . ..

Nusrat paints her father as a dynamic, forward-looking man who edited an influential Bengali journal, and the parent who opened up many opportunities for her. She talks fondly of relatively rare occasions when her father had some time to spare for her:

Going to see films—silent in those days . . . Charlie Chaplin, Shirley Temple . . . all those were silent films. Then going on trips . . . I had a special liking for outings . . .. It was difficult for him . . . he could not give too much time. But I think for all his busy-ness he was secure in the knowledge that the kind of environment . . . [I] was growing up in was my biggest gain [*paoya*]! . . . Among all these famous writers and intellectuals . . . I would call them *chacha* [uncle] . . .. As a child I did not fully understand how invaluable this environment was . . .."[49]

And yet, at times, Nusrat seems to be troubled by, if not a little critical of, his lack of sensitivity towards her mother. One event that stands out in Nusrat's memory offers a particularly poignant example of the encounter between her mother's wishes and her father's urbane/modern sensibilities:

One day Baba said [to my mother], "Listen, the child is now really young . . . there is no need for her to wear her hair so long. And also, that nose stud also cannot be kept." Ma said, "No, no, why? . . . Her grandmother gave her the stud for her nose [*naker phul*]. Let the hair and the stud alone . . .." But was my father about to listen to her? One day he took me to the goldsmith and had the nose-ring removed—they actually had to cut it. Then he took me to the hairdresser's and had my hair cut to a Chinese bob . . .. When I came home . . . my mother was furious! . . . "I worked so hard to grow her hair," she cried, "and you did not even ask me once!" . . . That day I saw my mother really cry! She had such an attachment to my hair—I had very beautiful thick curly hair . . .. She was also very hurt that my father ignored her wishes like that.. . .

In another telling recollection, Nusrat describes Farida's unhappiness over her husband's decision to enroll their daughter in school:

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein[50] . . . said to my father, '. . . admit your daughter to my school . . . there are nurses [*dai*], the bus is there . . . with curtains [*purdahwalla*] . . .

[49] Ibid.

[50] A well known Muslim intellectual and reformer who started a school for Muslim girls in Calcutta in 1911. Samsun Nahar Mahmud, *Rokeya Jibani* (Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash, 1996[1937]), 7.

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there will be no problems . . ..' When I went to see the Sakhawat school, I saw that there were many little girls like me . . . I really liked it . . .. But, *Ma!* Ma really opposed the idea. She said, "The child is so young, she will go so early in the morning and will not be back home until four in the afternoon. What kind of an arrangement is this? She will fall sick!" My father said, "If your daughter herself likes it . . .why should you object?' . . . But my mother remained unhappy . . ..

Of course, Farida's objections could not stand up to her husband's determination, and her specific, perhaps conventionally defined concerns for her daughter were summarily upstaged by her husband's more "modern" vision of childrearing. Still, as Nusrat remembers, Farida devised her own way of ensuring—unbeknownst to her husband—that her daughter received proper attention by giving money to the nurse (*dai*), and making a special appeal to their shared commitment to care-taking: "*Dai* would reassure her that I was a good child and that everything was fine . . .. [The] school had . . . little cots and pillows for the really young girls. After *tiffin* [lunch] break we were made to lie on those cots. Most of the girls did not sleep . . . but those who did fall asleep would not be disturbed until their guardians came to get them . . .."[51]

Nusrat talks at length about her experiences in Sakhawat Memorial School where, apart from conventional academics, students received instruction in music, acting, artwork, and sewing. As she recalls, the students were even graded on deportment and cleanliness. And it was these girls, many of whom eventually went on to attend Lady Brabourne College,[52] who would "fill the posts" left vacant by the exodus of the Hindus from East Bengal after the 1947 Partition.

Nusrat's story tells us much about the efforts of liberal Muslim intellectuals to effect social reforms by spreading mass education, ending practices such as seclusion and polygamy,[53] and making it possible for Muslim women to participate in contemporary intellectual life.[54] It is also clear that Nusrat prides herself on being a product of that liberal social milieu. In time, she herself became the editor of a popular women's journal which is still in circulation in Bangladesh. Yet, this narrative of liberal reforms amongst middle class Muslims, which so clearly challenges the dominant images of Muslim men as either backward-looking religious fanatics or conservative Mughal-identified elites, seems also to point, even if unwittingly, to the costs incurred

[51] Nusrat Begum, Dhaka, 1996.

[52] A college for Muslim women established in 1939 in Calcutta by Fazlul Huq, the head of the Bengal ministry at that time. Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, eds. *Zenana Mehfil: Bangali Musakman Lekhikader Nirbachita Rachana, 1904–1938* (Calcutta: Stree, 1998); Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876–1939* (New York: Leiden, 1996).

[53] For a discussion of effects of *purdah* on women, see Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, "Borka," in *Matichur* 1 (Calcuttta, 1905), 47–53, repr. in *Begum Rokeya Rachanabali*, ed. Abdul Quadir, 2d ed. (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1984).

[54] Nusrat's father edited an important periodical for Muslim women.

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by such reforms. Women like Nusrat's mother Farida sometimes appear in these stories as reluctant participants in these experiments, caught as it were between their own 'traditional' or 'backward' sensibilities and the desire, or compulsion, to keep up with their 'modern' husbands and children.

Farida had no formal education, and yet it was she who taught her daughter to read and write, since her husband was always busy with work. Nusrat acknowledges that she got much more attention and love from her mother who taught her "whatever she knew—needlework, good cooking, or *atithi apyayan kara* [hospitality]." Nusrat also talked briefly about Farida's unwillingness to venture out of the house until she turned fifty, in spite of her father's encouragement: "The wives [*paribar*[55]] of other writers ... would go out sometimes ... but not my mother .... She was a little conservative ... She did not even come out in front of Qaji Saheb[56] ... she would speak from behind [the curtain or door]. Baba would say, "Why do you maintain *parda* (seclusion)[57] in his presence? He comes here so often ... his wife comes out in front of me!" But she would say, "No, I do not like it." In the rest of her testimony, Nusrat mentions her mother only a few times, mostly in the context of the care she took of the various writers and poets who would come to the house, as per her husbands' wishes. As Nusrat recounts, "All the writers would meet at the journal office. [My job was to] bring the *paan* [betel leaf] for Qaji Saheb ... and *jarda* [tobacco], and tea ... that my mother made herself .... My father would say, 'Look, the poets and writers do not come here for money. They come for a little rest, a little peace .... Please make sure that they are not uncared for here ....' And ... my mother always did this work."

In Nusrat's recollection, her mother thus remains an oddly defiant figure, whose world may have been superseded by the onward march of 'progress' as some would define it, but she herself continued to elude its reach. Ironically, the success of these experiments with modernity that constructed women like Farida as "custom-bound/backward" in fact depended to a large extent on the very traditionalism of these women—for instance, their sense of duty to their husbands and families, or the importance they attached to the art of hospitality. Vision, some scholars would contend, has been crucial to the construction of the subject ever since the Renaissance.[58] It is unfortunate that narratives of modernity, preoccupied as they are with triumphalist accounts of 'coming out,' and 'becoming visible,' so often fail to recognize

[55] Literally "family." It can also mean "wife."
[56] Nazrul Islam.
[57] This is the Bengali equivalent of the Urdu word *purdah*. Literally, it means curtain or veil, but it is used to refer to the observance of seclusion.
[58] Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," 775. Also see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

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the agency of *pardanasheen*[59] women who refused token 'visibility' but contributed nonetheless to the success of reformist efforts, even from behind the *purdah*.

If most of the women I spoke to were oblique in their criticism, Meherunnessa Begum comes across as openly disdainful of Muslim men, their conservatism, and what she variously describes as their lack of "modern sensibilities" or their inadequate understanding of the "changing times." Born into a relatively affluent family of Muslim businessmen in Calcutta, in 1924, Meherunnessa lives alone in one part of the large family house in Park Circus in which she grew up, now divided among various units of a once-joint family. At the time of the interview, she had retired from her long teaching career at the Sakhawat Memorial School, where she had also been a student.

Although fluent in Bengali and well versed in English, Meherunnessa speaks both languages with the distinct accent of someone whose first language is Urdu. Not surprisingly, therefore, the intertexts[60] in her speech also typically come from Urdu, even if mostly in translation. She is also an animated speaker who is likely to appropriate the direct speeches of several actors within the course of narrating a single episode or illustration, making it difficult for the listener to isolate her own authorial voice. For instance, her overall criticism of Muslim society in pre-Partition Calcutta seems to echo closely the 'lagging behind' discourse adopted by the colonial administration vis-à-vis Muslims since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The insistent focus on this single theme throughout her testimony may also signal that she is—perhaps unconsciously—providing the kind of information that she thinks a non-Muslim person (especially a Hindu woman) might expect to hear about Muslim society. And yet, as we shall see, Meherunnessa's stories are remarkably rich in their evocation, even if in passing, of the quotidian life of upper and middle class Muslim households in Calcutta. I also think that in spite of their criticism—delivered often in borrowed voices—these stories betray a certain sadness, if not yearning, for a time of gracious living now long gone.

Meherunnessa has seen the fortunes of many a family dwindle away because of what she describes as an inability of Muslims to "let go of the past." While she describes her own parents as "forward looking"—they sent her to school, for instance—members of their larger joint family, as well as neighbors, seem to have thought that the "easy life" they were leading would continue forever. Consequently, they were unprepared by the changes brought about by World War II. The first woman in her family to

[59] Women who observe strict *purdah/parda*, or seclusion.

[60] Other discourses brought, directly or indirectly, into the time and space of our own. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Language and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Mannheim and Tedlock, "Introduction," 16.

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go to school, Meherunnessa is particularly scornful of the neglect of education in Muslim society, and especially the kinds of restrictions it placed on women. As she recalls:

> The idea [was] that if girls learnt to read they would be spoilt .... Tutors might come to the house ... [Girls] would even learn to speak English, but no one would go to school .... In those days, holding a book meant [committing] a sin! If say, girls are reading, [the parents] would come ten times to ... check whether there is anything hidden among the leaves of the book ... some love letter from the neighbor or something .... *Achha*! You don't even trust your own daughter? This was the level of paranoia!

The situation was apparently not much better in terms of educating men; while sons were often sent to school, parents seldom paid attention to what they were studying: "Very rarely have I seen parents push their children to excel in school .... Say a Muslim girl got a scholarship, people would think that it is charity [*khayraat*] .... "Why? Her father does not have money? *Gormenter takaye porchhe* [studying with government assistance]!" The studious girl in this story could easily have been Meherunnessa herself. As she intimates elsewhere, her decision to attend college may not have been popular among her relatives, but in time they came to appreciate her ability to support herself, thus avoiding the possible ignominy of depending on one or more of her brothers, as was customary for unmarried or widowed women in her parents' and sometimes even in her own generation. As she muses below: "But what would her life be like? ... I have seen my own aunts ... it was a pathetic life, *hai na*? ... Those that have some education [can get jobs] ... live in one room or two rooms [within a larger house, with or without relatives], but live independently ... no problem in this way."

Meherunnessa's pride in her independence is of course well justified. Her observations about the problems of Muslim women, especially in previous generations, are entirely borne out by official statistics. For instance, in 1931–1932, of the total number of male students attending college (including professional colleges) in Bengal, 13.6 percent were Muslim as against 84.1 percent Hindus; the corresponding figures for female students pursuing college or professional degrees were a mere 1 percent for Muslims, and 74 percent for Hindus; and this, in a state (undivided Bengal) where more than half the population was Muslim.[61] Meherunnessa's account of meeting Hindu students in school affords us a rare glimpse of the experiential dimensions of what is embodied in such statistics:

[61] The figures for Muslim participation in schools were higher: in 1931–1932 it was 49.9 percent of total number of boys in primary and secondary schools, and 56.5 percent of total number of girls in primary schools. However, most of the students were concentrated in primary schools, dwindling to 16.8 percent for boys and a mere 1.6 percent for girls by class X (i.e., class 10). *Report of the Moslem Education Advisory Committee, Government of Bengal* (Alipore, Bengal: Bengal Government Press, 1934), 26–29; 52–53; 110–11.

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We were the first girls, sometimes, in our families to go to school . . .. [We] would often be in awe of . . . the general knowledge of [Hindu girls]. We used to say amongst ourselves, 'We are still living in darkness' [*Hamlog abhitak andhere me hain*] . . .. I think in my [older] sister's generation many women were unhappy about the restrictions that plagued their lives, especially since they had Hindu friends who were doing so many things. But our guardians did not care . . ..

And yet, in retrospect, it seems unfortunate that so many of her observations about life in her childhood—recollected within the dialogic constraints of this particular interview situation—should have been haunted by the specter of Muslim 'backwardness,' or her indictment of it, often to the exclusion of other kinds of narratives. Listening to her incidental comments about the joint-family structure with "aunts and uncles," scores of cousins, relatives visiting for extended periods, "boys running out to see wedding processions," or "women dressing up together," one wonders what other stories might have been told about a life that seemed to be also joyful.

Meherunnessa does not mention close Hindu friends, although when asked about her interactions with Hindus she insists that she has always had very good relations with Hindu friends and neighbors. She remembers, in this context, Hindu neighbors with whom her father would play cards, and whom she would address as "uncles," or Hindu girl friends of her older sister, and, of course, a somewhat amorphous group of "classmates" in her school. But her allusions to parental ambitions regarding children's education, sons' careers, or governmental scholarships signal the presence of the Hindu middle class as the implicit referent. She even adopts the imagined voice of a Hindu middle class parent when she delineates what, in her mind, ought to be the appropriate parental attitude to children's education: "you have to be a doctor, engineer, barrister . . .." However, while at first glance her relationship to Hindus appears to be one of distant appreciation, a closer look reveals a more complex set of reactions.

Consider, for instance, the following sarcastic reflection on the reasons behind Muslim men's disinterest in education in the pre-World War II period:

The British came after the Mughal kingdom [*sic*], right? So . . . [Muslim men] know that they are the people of the ruler's race [*ora to rajar jater lok*]—the descendants of the Mughals! [They would think] . . . "Why should we be someone else's servants? We will do business!" That too, nothing small, mind you! Big business! . . . At that time, the consciousness that you could actually succeed from modest beginnings was simply not there among Muslim [men]. *Chakri*[62] [service]! Oh no! . . . Whatever property they inherited from their forefathers, [they] simply lived off selling that! . . . All [of them] walked around dressed in fine clothes . . . smoked imported cigars . . . but no one would have any kind of degree . . ..

[62] For a discussion of *chakri* and its effects on the *bhadralok* in the nineteenth century, see Sumit Sarkar, "'Kaliyuga,' 'Chakri' and 'Bhakti': Ramkrishna and His Times," *Economic and Political Weekly* (18 July 1992), 1543–66.

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Here, Meherunnessa is clearly invoking the example of the Hindu *bhadralok*, who were willing, and for decades more equipped, to take up formal employment under the British. Yet, the same reference to Hindu proclivity for *chakri*, and the simultaneous assertion of Muslim self-identification as the erstwhile "rulers," also invokes a power discourse with entirely different stakes. It values entrepreneurship, not the servility of *chakri*, prefers grand ideas to following instructions, and echoes European colonial discourses about the natural division between the rulers and the ruled, deployed against all colonized populations, but appropriated here in the voices of Muslim men who arrogate to themselves the right to rule and refuse success on terms unacceptable to them. It is not at all clear which, if any, of these several voices that Meherunnessa inhabits above are hers.

Her ambivalence is clearer still when she reflects on the ability of Hindus to adapt to change. In one memorable account, Meherunnessa begins talking about the indirect involvement of Muslim women in some social mobilization efforts of the *bhadralok*, but then switches suddenly to a reflection on money in pre-World War II India, the naivety of Muslim women, and in sharp contrast, the resourcefulness of Hindu women:

I have not seen many Muslim women participate in political movements as such, but when floods happened … then … well dressed men … carrying harmoniums … would go around singing songs about flood and asking [for contributions to their relief efforts]. Then … Muslim women [would send younger children with] clothes and money [to] put in the [make-shift cloth bag]. And money in those days … each *taka* [rupee] was made of *ek bhari*[63] silver! Do you understand? What our *Bharatbarsha* [India] was like! … If women kept ten silver rupees tied to their *anchal*,[64] their *shari* would be at the point of tearing! … You know how backward Muslims were [Muslim] women? When the war came … the coins were silver, right? These women still thought that the world was always going to be the same …. [But] Hindu women! They removed those silver coins from sight altogether [*adrishya kore phellen*]. Later, they [Hindu women] brought out all that silver … *taka*! Full containers of silver coins! Even women my mother knew! … What came out of the boxes of Muslim women were guineas, not silver! … Guineas are made of gold. They understood [the value of] that! So they kept those [guineas]…. But it had never occurred to them to save the silver, you understand? They spent all the silver coins! [Meanwhile] *ora hoard korechhe. Ora hoard korechhe, non-Muslimra!* [The non-Muslims hoarded them!] So much silver and gold came out of their boxes! … I have asked many [Muslim] women myself, "*Achha*! How much silver did you save?" [They would say,] "Nothing! I did not realize [the silver coins] would disappear!" … Hindu women … they were educated! … They … realized what the future held. You understand? After the war silver coins were completely replaced by bills—*paper! Hai na?* … You see now, how clever [the Hindus]

[63] Unit of weight equal to 180 grains. *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary* (Calcutta: Shishu Sahitya Samsad, 1995).

[64] One end of the *sari* or *shari*.

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were! . . . They kept [the coins], they knew [that these were valuable] . . . they had foresight! . . . But not Muslims![65]

That Meherunnessa is frustrated with the lack of sagacity and foresight among Muslims in general and, Muslim women in particular, is clear. But I want to focus here on her use of the word "hoard" to describe the "cleverness" of the Hindus.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one meaning of "hoarding" is simply to "amass and put away"; but in another, more figurative sense, the word denotes concealing, that is, withholding from others, presumably to further one's personal aspirations or welfare. In the first sense, "to hoard" is not appreciably different from "to save," but in the second sense, the word carries an additional, moral charge of selfishness, of an intent to garner unfair advantage for one's own benefit, to the considered exclusion of others. In my reading, Meherunnessa uses "hoard" in the second, more accusative sense of the word, twice, and with increasing deliberateness. Her use of the term "non-Muslims" to refer to Hindus in this sentence further underscores something of an essential cultural and perhaps even moral difference between the conduct of Hindus ("hoarding"/thriftiness) and Muslims ("spending"/largess). Finally, note that at one level this story is also about social closure, about the foundering of informal networks at the "imaginary line," to echo Jahan Ara Begum's words, which seemed to increasingly separate Muslims from Hindus in mid-1940s Calcutta.

Meherunnessa does not describe Muslim women only as "backward," however. In her stories, many of them appear also as talented singers, writers, and painters. Some of the women she mentions were even resourceful enough to circumvent the restrictions placed on them. Take, for instance, Meherunnessa's teacher Nusreen Begum, who was one of the first Muslim women to teach at Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein's school. Nusreen's husband would not allow her to work, but she was determined to teach. So, she told her otherwise reform-minded husband that she was doing "social/charity work," when in fact she went to work teaching. A dynamic woman well into her nineties, Nusreen bent over with laughter as she recounted how she hid the money: "Oh . . . I hid the money in my *borkha*. And my husband would never know where to look in the *zenana*. I suppose I lied to him, but I had my own money to spend as I pleased!"[66]

Nusreen's example points to the grit and resourcefulness of many women of her generation who negotiated restrictions placed on them, at times even using to their advantage the very technologies of seclusion—the *borkha* and the *zenana*—meant to constrain their movement, as shields from male scrutiny and control.

[65] Meherunnessa Begum, Calcutta, 1996.
[66] Nusreen Begum, Calcutta, 1996.

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Muslims as Lower Caste/Lower Class Converts

A third theme that recurs in these life stories deals with the image of Muslims as originally low caste/class Hindus, which, as we have seen, surfaces almost in tandem with assertions of Bengali-ness. The speakers seem generally anxious to communicate their class status through a number of different mechanisms, from descriptions of the neighborhoods they lived in, to stories about trips to "hill-stations" in summer "for a change,"[67] to accounts of life in seclusion, something more strictly observed by the middle and upper classes. Jahan Ara Begum, for instance, described the area of Calcutta where she grew up, and still lives in, as a formerly affluent neighborhood: "Park Circus was very nice ... many government officials lived there. It was not as congested and dirty as it is today. Most of these people came after Partition.[68] And quite a few Hindu middle class families also lived there .... [Of course] middle class in those days ... would be closer to today's upper middle class status ... I mean at least that."[69]

Mumtaz Waheeda is also quick to point out the upper class background of her father's family who owned "ten or twelve houses" in the Bhabanipur area of South Calcutta. She also repeatedly mentions the "huge house" her father built after the 1946 riots in another part of the city, her mother's aristocratic upbringing, and the continued professional success of many of her relatives—the "high posts" they hold in both India and Bangladesh.

Meherunnessa, on the other hand, does not directly assert her family's class stature. She simply allows the myriad strands in the conversation to subtly underscore her family's *ashraf* identification: "wastefulness" and the inability of Muslim women to understand the "value of silver"; the practice of giving gold guineas as gifts to children during festivals; the use of silver toys; or the disdain of Muslim men for instruments of social mobility and financial security such as government scholarships or service, or life insurance.

The most intriguing effort to this end, however, came from Jahan Ara Begum as she related a family legend. We have already seen Jahan Ara repeatedly emphasizing her family's Bengali-ness. In this remarkable story and the commentary surrounding it, she attempts to further contextualize that Bengaliness by both giving it depth in terms of a Hindu ancestry and staking claim to an unassailable past high caste location for her family. She prefaces this story by telling me that her family does not easily share it with others, signaling thereby that she has decided to trust me not to misapprehend its intended message, and, that she considers this interview important enough to take this chance of revealing something dear to her family:

[67] It was typical of the Calcutta middle and upper classes to rent a house in hill stations for vacations.

[68] Here, Jahan Ara is referring to poorer Muslims who moved into the area after independence, often from the neighbouring state of Bihar.

[69] Jahan Ara Begum, Calcutta, 1996.

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We have an interesting family story .... My father's family came from *24 Parganas*,[70] where they have land and other property. In that area, the Khan Sahebs[71] are very well known and respected [*Khansahebder khub sunam*]. The men in our family, including my father, were extremely handsome .... I mean they were so good looking that people would stare at them. So we heard this story when we were young.

Seven generations before my father, in our family tree, we find the names of two Brahmin brothers who lived in a village in *Khulna-Jashore*.[72] The story goes that these Brahmin brothers were going somewhere during the month of *roja*,[73] when they saw the *zamindar* [landowner]—a Mussalman—smelling a ripe mango. These Brahmin brothers half-jokingly said to him, "*Janaab*, you have just broken your fast! You know how we say, "*ghranena ardhyabhojanam*" [smelling food amounts to half-eating]. Now that you have smelled the mango, you have already eaten. *Galo ajker rojata!* The *zamindar* said, "*Tai*? It is broken? *Achha besh*."

A few days passed. One day, the *zamindar* sent for the two brothers. In the room next to where these brothers were sitting, the *zamindar* made arrangements to have a huge pot of *biriyani* cooked with beef.[74] Of course the aroma of the *biriyani* spread through the whole house. So ... the *zamindar* said, "Did you smell the *biriyani*? Oh well! Now you lost your *jat* also!"[75] ... These Brahmin brothers actually thought that they had lost their *jat* and converted to Islam. The rest of the brothers, however, remained Hindu. We, in our family pedigree, find one Jaideb Thakur who became Jamaluddin Khan, and his brother Kamdeb Thakur who became Kamruddin Khan. And this is the beginning of this Khan family.[76]

Thakur here is a reference to the famous Thakur or Tagore family of *Jorasanko*.[77] It is fascinating that Jahan Ara Begum introduces the tale as a "family story," but ends on a rather definitive note that suggests that, notwithstanding the story's origins, for her and her family "this is the beginning of this Khan family." She has, in other words, made a choice to believe in and tell a story that is consistent with her family's sense of itself. Jahan Ara is aware, of course, that the verity of this story can be questioned, so she proceeds to offer various "proofs" that might bolster its credibility, including independent research by scholars,[78] and the "striking resemblance" between Rabindranath Thakur and the men in her family. At the end, however, she waves her hand and says, "Anyway, it is not a big issue. After all. it is

[70] A district in West Bengal.
[71] The men of the Khan family.
[72] Districts in East Bengal, now Bangladesh.
[73] Month of Ramzan or Ramadan.
[74] Rice cooked with meat.
[75] In this case *jat* refers to caste. Eating beef is forbidden by Hinduism. Brahmins, members of the highest caste, are supposed to be vegetarian. For a discussion of the various uses of the word *jat* or *jati* in most Indian languages, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 166.
[76] Jahan Ara Begum, Calcutta, 1996.
[77] The well-known reformist family of the Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Thakur (Tagore).
[78] Jahan Ara mentions the book *Jashore-Khulnar Itikatha*, probably, Satis Chandra Mitra, *Yasohara-Khulnara Itihasa* [*The History of Jasore-Khulna* vol. I & II, 3rd edition, Calcutta, 1963–1965]. She also mentions Sunil Gangopadhyay, a noted contemporary Bengali writer-novelist, who mentions this incident in an essay.

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also true that most Mussalmans in Bengal were converts in one way or another."[79]

Oral historians have argued that the peculiar strength of oral histories lies not so much in their capacity to provide new facts, but rather in their ability to provide valuable insights into the speakers' subjectivity, even unconscious desires and ideologies. As Alessandro Portelli argues, "The first thing that makes oral history different ... is that it tells us less about the events than about their meaning. This does not imply that oral history has not factual validity .... But ... the diversity of oral sources consists in the fact that [so called] 'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts."[80]

In the excerpt above, Jahan Ara Begum is only too aware that even if the authenticity of this incident is established, nothing can adequately corroborate her family's claims to it. As her final comment, "all Mussalmans in Bengal were converts" suggests that any number of Bengali Muslim families could lay similar claims to a high caste origin. In relating this story as a family legend, however, she takes a certain risk in revealing something about how she would like to be seen. It is her way of confronting a dominant discourse that freezes Bengali Muslims into two categories: foreign-born *ashrafs*, and low-caste indigenous converts. By carving out a different location from which she creates her own identity—even if it is the realm of lore—she challenges a whole set of meanings and associations, which inhere in the term "convert." In my reading, her decision to narrate this story is an expression of her desire for respect—a respect that, according to her, many Hindus still deny Muslims in contemporary India.

The problem of respect, or lack of it, which I believe Jahan Ara Begum is addressing in her story is obviously not a new one. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the perceived difference between Hindus and Muslims in terms of access to 'modern' education, well-paying jobs, and the cultivation of what increasingly passed for 'modern' (read liberal/Hindu nationalist) culture was already significant enough to cause considerable unpleasantness between the two communities. In the words of the late writer Sufia Kamal, "One crucial source of bitterness between the two communities was access to jobs—jobs with the British administration that created the all-important division between *bhadralok* and *chotolok*.[81] One thing you must remember ... Hindu society never recognised Muslims as *bhadralok*. Hindus would typically refer to Mussalmans as *lede*or *nede*[82]. ... I must say that most

[79] Jahan Ara Begum, Calcutta, 1996.

[80] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. (London: Routlege, 1998), 68.

[81] Literally "small folk," or poor or working people.

[82] Derogatory terms used to refer to Muslims, usually converts.

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of the Hindu *bhadrasampraday*[83] [including women]did not believe that there could be gentle-folk amongst Mussalmans."

Sufia Kamal goes on to elaborate ways in which Hindus expressed their disdain for Muslims:

> [Hindus] had various discomforts—perhaps stemming from religious ritualism—about Mussalmans . . . visiting them . . .. I have seen this in my own life . . .. [If] we were to visit a Hindu household, first of all we would sit in the outer rooms; . . . even there, they would sprinkle cow-dung water[84] when we got up. I was young then . . .. The younger generation was different—they were educated, enlightened . . .. Besides, the Hindu families that we were close to . . . they had no problems . . .. [Unfortunately] such tendencies to treat Mussalmans as inferior, uneducated, or even untouchable, were common enough . . . to lead to bitterness and eventually anger among Mussalmans. It is a legitimate feeling—since we treat them well . . . why should they treat us with so much disdain?[85]

Even today, for a vast majority of Bengali Hindus the category *bhadralok* by definition means the Hindu upper caste/middle class, while the category Mussalman still seems to conjure up images disturbingly similar to Hunter's description of the "fanatical masses" of converts: men with caps and *lungis*,[86] and women in *borkhas*, backward, inferior, somehow inherently opposed to all that is aligned with Reason and Progress. Consequently, as Zohra Sultana complained: "When I say I am Mussalman, [Hindu Bengali] people are really surprised. 'You really are Mussalman?' they ask. 'But one would not think so by looking at you!' As if all Mussalmans have to have a particular look! . . . It is ridiculous!"[87] Or, as Jahan Ara Begum puts it, "[The] average Hindu . . . cannot recognize me as Mussalman, [so] I have to hear [all] kinds of [derogatory] remarks [about Muslims] all the time. How will they know? They have not seen Mussalmans like me. After the Partition most of the educated middle class Muslims migrated [to East Pakistan/Bangladesh]."[88]

Zohra and Jahan Ara are, of course, indignant because the enduring image of Muslims as lower class/caste Hindus routinely renders middle class Muslims like themselves invisible in contemporary India. But their experiences also hint at the peculiar predicament that the increasingly automatic equation of Muslim religiosity with an anti-modern and anti-national stance presents for "educated" middle class Muslims. Their ability to pass, or be accepted as unmarked, normalized citizen-subjects, depends on their willingness and ability to distance themselves from tell-tale signs of Muslim-ness.[89] In the final section, I briefly examine

[83] The Educated, typically propertied, middle class, or gentry.
[84] I consider it to be a purifier.
[85] Begum Sufia Kamal, personal communication, Dhaka, 1996.
[86] A wrap worn around the waist by men in parts of South and Southeast Asia.
[87] Zohra Sultana, Calcutta, 1996.
[88] Jahan Ara Begum, Calcutta, 2000.
[89] Mahua Sarkar, "'Community' and 'Nation': Groping for Alternative Narratives." *Economic and Political Weekly* (27 Dec. 2003), 5335–37.

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this specific difficulty through the narration of a particular incident, drawn from my field notes.

Muslims as "Liberal," "Progressive," or "Just Like Us (Hindus)"

Late one afternoon in August 2000 I arrived at Jahan Ara Begum's house in Park Circus, Calcutta. She had asked me to come on that day to meet some of her old friends from school. It was raining hard, and Jahan Ara was concerned that I might catch cold from being wet. As I dried myself, she introduced me to her friends as "a daughter" to her. From the surprise on their faces, I gathered that she had not mentioned me to them before that moment. They seemed curious, presumably because I had been invited to this gathering of old friends.

I will refer to Jahan Ara's friends as Purnima Ganguly, Chaitali Bose, and Angana Mitra.[90] At first they were still talking about a wedding that had recently taken place between a Muslim man and the daughter of a friend who is Hindu. After some time, however, Purnima and Chaitali turned to me with some interest. They asked me about my work, and then began telling me about themselves. I noticed that they addressed Jahan Ara Begum by her pet name.[91] From the beginning, they seemed anxious to establish the depth of their friendship. It also seemed that both Purnima and Chaitali prided themselves for their acceptance of and closeness to "liberal" Muslims such as Jahan Ara Begum.

Purnima: You know, we have known each other forever. Jahan, Chaitali, and I, and a few others. Haven't we?

Chaitali: Yes, from school days. We have been friends for a long time. In the middle, for a while we were not all here, in Calcutta. But now again in our old age we have come together. Now we meet often. We share a lot, a lot of memories, don't we? I guess you could say this is quite remarkable . . .. It is not very common, you know, especially among today's [younger] generations . . ..

Purnima: I have grandchildren, you know. I am sixty-two years old! Could you tell looking at me?

Purnima began telling us about her daughter and her family in England, and her own experiences during a recent visit there. One incident that seemed to stand out in her mind was when her daughter's friends tried to pay her for taking care of their child for one evening. As she put it indignantly: "I was taking care of the child as I was my own granddaughter. How could [they] even imagine that I would want money for that! Frankly, I was quite insulted, but my daughter explained that this was quite customary there [in the West]. *Jani na baba*,[92] I don't understand

[90] The names are all Hindu as were the women present. I have changed the names to preserve their privacy. Angana Mitra came a little later, so she was not present during some of the conversation recounted below.

[91] I use "Jahan" as her pet name.

[92] "I don't know," in Bengali.

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such customs . . ..”[93] Her friends expressed their shock and agreed that relationships in the “West” simply were not the same as relationships in India, that it was difficult to be close to “Westerners” who understood everything in “material terms,” and that it was indeed very “rude” of the parents to try to pay her.

Over tea, the conversation turned back to relationships between Hindus and Muslims in India today. Jahan Ara Begum—who has two sisters living in Bangladesh—was talking about her recent trip there, when Purnima suddenly said, “I am sorry Jahan, but I have to say that the Bangladeshis are far more open [to Hindus].”

Jahan Ara, visibly annoyed, flared up: “Why did you say that to me? No, don’t say that it was a general comment. You specifically addressed me! Why? What do you mean by that?”

Purnima, somewhat embarrassed, faltered: “I was just making an observation . . ..”

Jahan Ara, not mollified, insisted: “But you looked at me when you said that . . .!”

The others now intervened on Purnima’s behalf. Angana Mitra, who had joined us shortly before, started talking loudly about how she grew up in Barisal [now in Bangladesh], where Hindus and Muslims were “very close”: “You really cannot compare Muslims in East Bengal with Muslims here [Calcutta/West Bengal]. . .. [Muslims in East Bengal] have always been more open [to socializing with Hindus].”

As I listened, I could not help but notice that the issue of closeness between Hindus and Muslims—even the possibility thereof—was being made to turn on the attitudes and behaviors of *Muslims* on either side of the east/west divide in Bengal. It was as if Hindu actions were entirely reactive, and hence they were absolved of any responsibility for the outcomes of encounters between the two communities. I thought of my many conversations with Muslim women both in Calcutta and Dhaka in the course of my fieldwork, in which the speakers repeatedly hinted at, and in some cases openly pointed to, Hindu obsessions with “purity” and ritual cleanliness which kept Muslims at arm’s length.[94] I also remembered conversations with Hindu women in Calcutta in which they talked of their discomfort with the “strong odor” that the bodies of Muslims girls “would sometimes emit,” and the use of the “veil” by their Muslim classmates, of their concerns with Hindu women who married into Muslim families and then “disappeared from sight,” and of the relative sense of ease the felt when with those Muslim women whom one “could not distinguish easily from *us* [Hindus].”[95]

[93] Purnima Ganguly, Calcutta, Aug. 2000.

[94] Sufia Kamal, Dhaka, 1996; Shafinaz Hossein, Dhaka, 1996.

[95] I am referring here specifically to conversations with three women, Ila Chatterjee, Mala Sengupta, and Nandita Sinha, in Calcutta in 1996, although expressions of similar sentiments about Muslims are common among Hindu women in contemporary Calcutta.

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The atmosphere in the room had meanwhile grown distinctly uncomfortable. It was clear that Jahan Ara Begum had remained indignant and unimpressed by her friends' protestations. At this point Purnima, now quite desperate, embarked on yet another story:

Jahan, but you have always been different. That is why I was saying this to you ….. I will tell you something else that happened to me in England. One day my daughter had a get-together. So I made some beef. And this Muslim woman who was there—quite young—simply refused to eat it! Why? Because it was not *halal*! I was so shocked!

Here, Purnima turned to me and continued:

I am not used to Muslims who make these distinctions, you know. Jahan never even asked such things and she has eaten at my place so many times! [Turning now to Jahan Ara] You don't care about these things, about maintaining *parda* or eating only *halal* meat, Jahan, but others do. And that is a measure of your liberalness. That is what I was trying to get at.

Jahan Ara: "Well, we were brought up very differently, so we could mix more easily, I suppose ….." Jahan Ara Begum still seemed distinctly unhappy with the double-edged compliments and the implications of this story, which put the burden of "being acceptable" squarely on Muslims. A restless silence had again descended on the room. I turned to Purnima and asked why is it that wearing the *borkha* or caring about *halal* meat makes a Muslim woman less acceptable, even to liberal Hindus.

Before Purnima could formulate an answer, Jahan Ara Begum burst out excitedly:

I am telling you, it is true that we have been friends for many years—good friends—but the effort was always on my part. I was always more enthusiastic about these relationships, and I tried hard not to stand out, to fit in. [And then turning to her increasingly uncomfortable friends] I don't think you realize this, you take it for granted. You won't understand what it means to be minority, because you have never been that. No, you really don't know what it means to be Muslim [in India]. . ..

Her friends all began to protest: "What do you mean? You mean here? No! Not now! Really? You mean even now? Why do you say that?"

Jahan Ara began relating her recent experiences, both at the airport on her return from *Haj*[96] and in her capacity as a social worker, with customs and police officers who routinely assume the essential disloyalty of Muslims to an implicitly Hindu nation, even referring to them as "the true enemies of India."

It was evening now. The *azaan*[97] for *Maghrib namaaz*[98] came floating in above the relentless sound of the rain. The tea gathering was obviously coming to an end and the guests were getting ready to face the "water-

[96] A pilgrimage to Mecca.

[97] The call to prayer, which is repeated five times each day, about fifteen minutes before the time of the specific *namaaz* (prayer).

[98] Evening prayer, lasting until twilight fades.

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logging."[99] Jahan Ara Begum excused herself and went to the next room. I assumed she had gone in for her *namaaz* for the evening. A few minutes passed. Her friends were a little restless waiting for her.

Angana: "Where did Jahan go?"

Chaitali: "I don't know . . . maybe the bathroom."

I ventured that she was probably performing her *namaaz*. To my surprise, all three of them seemed visibly rattled. As they looked uncertainly at each other, I wondered whether this was the first time that they had heard of Jahan Ara doing something so explicitly Muslim, and whether it made them think of her differently. I thought that they looked skeptical, and I imagined that they thought she was putting on a show for my benefit.

I, of course, had often seen Jahan Ara Begum discreetly take her leave for *namaaz*. I thought of the first time I had come to meet her, four years before. She had continued to talk even as the distinctive sound of the *azaan* had wafted insistently in with the warm summer breeze. At one point, I had stopped the tape to ask if she wanted to take a break for her prayer. I remembered how she had seemed a little surprised, and said that it could wait a bit.[100] I had thought of her as polite and considerate then. Now, for the first time I wondered whether she had ignored the *azaan* out of a long-standing habit of downplaying her Muslim-ness in the presence of Hindus who present themselves as secular, as liberal.[101]

[99] That is, water that accumulates with heavy rain on the streets of Calcutta.

[100] A similar incident had taken place during my first meeting with Meherunnessa Begum.

[101] Jahan Ara has often commented on her comfort in expressing her strong faith in Islam in the presence of Hindus who are themselves religious. She feels that they understand and respect her religiosity, as she does theirs.

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