

Muslim Children's Agency Amidst Hate Crimes and Right-wing Nationalism in India

Shaima Amatullah, MSc, PhD Student (National Institute of Advanced Studies)
shaima.amatullah@gmail.com

Shalini Dixit, PhD (National Institute of Advanced Studies)
shalinidixit3@nias.res.in

The gang rape and murder of Asifa, an 8-year-old Muslim girl, in a Hindu temple in 2018 and the death of Tabrez Ansari, a 24-year-old Muslim man who was tied to a tree and lynched while he was forced to chant Hindu religious slogans in 2019, have been two of the most well-known crimes among the series of recent anti-Muslim violence in India (Jaffrelot 2021).¹ With the rising of Hindutva's far-right nationalism which aims to build a Hindu nation, the 'othering' of Muslims has currently taken a vigorous, tangible form (Chakrabarty and Jha 2020). The nationwide protests held in opposition to these hate crimes and 'othering' in turn have led to attacks on students and riots in certain parts of the country. Similarly, in the global context, especially post 9/11, Muslim children have been subjected to micro-aggressions and Islamophobic crimes (Elkassam et al. 2018; Farooqui and Kaushik 2020) based on a similar essentialization of Muslims as more loyal to their religion than to their nations. Little has been discussed about the agency of children who grow up in such marginalizing contexts, especially in South Asia (Sen 2016) though there is a growing interest in the complexity of agency within childhood studies (Esser et al. 2016) post the work of Prout and James (1997).

Understanding the agency of such marginalized children requires a deeper engagement with how oppressive structures interact with socio-political realities rather than assuming a simplified, romanticized existence of agency (Durham 2008; Hanson et al. 2018). Children are neither completely free nor completely bound as their ability to act varies even within marginalizing social contexts (Robson, Bell, and Klocker 2007). They have shown to have tactic agency (Honwana 2005), thin or thick agency (Klocker 2007), ambiguous agency (Bordonaro and Payne 2012), or relative agency (White and Choudhury 2009).

In my ethnographic study with school-going Muslim children in Bangalore, India, I observed and interviewed students, in the age group of 13-16 years, in a faith-based Islamic school between November 2019 and February 2020. My study aimed to understand the identity negotiations of Muslim students in the face of dominant socio-political discourses in India that cast them as 'the other.' Since the majority of the students were Muslim, the school itself acted as a 'safe space' that allowed self-expression (Robson, Bell, and Klocker 2007). Additionally, my own identity as a Muslim researcher belonging to the same geographical and cultural context may have made the students think of me as an 'insider'. However, as I question being an "authentic insider" (Aguilar 1981), I move away from the insider-outsider binary and recognize my identity as multiplex (Narayan 1993), which partially resonates with those of my participants. During my fieldwork, as I sat with the students on their benches during their classes, I became familiar and established rapport with them during the breaks. I picked on the classroom observations related to current affairs during the detailed interviews as a dialectic between my field notes' reflections and

gathering more insights (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Also, simple questions like “Do you read the news?” brought forth discussions on hate crimes since the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act/Bill protests were ongoing at the time.² I transcribed and coded the data until abstract analytical themes emerged.

The students referred to the popular example of Tabrez Ansari and identified deaths due to mob lynchings as specific crimes that come under the mission of the Hindu nation. While they considered these crimes as steps towards a gradual ethnic cleansing of Muslims, they thought of the Asifa rape case as a means to instill fear. Some boys also witnessed local incidents where Muslims were unjustly targeted and punished by the police. In their conversations/interviews, children often tended to switch between examples of religiously motivated crimes globally and locally, including the deaths of Muslims in Syria, Palestine, and during Christchurch mosque shootings. As these realities formed an essential part of their socialization, children had been active participants in certain protests, usually along with their parents. Many of them voiced their emotions of fear, anger, and helplessness. They were found to be oscillating between making sense of these emotions and the “need to do something” or “speak up against injustices” just like Muslim youth, popular on TikTok, had made videos asking for justice in the Ansari case. However, they felt restricted due to parental authority. Safer³, a 13-year-old boy, said “We are children so our parents have given some limits, even if we want to do something they will say, no you are a child.” The agency of children who grow up in distressing environments hinges upon the support of adults, situated in the same context, to be able to exercise it (White and Choudhury 2009).

Agency became “thinner” (Klocker 2007) for girls as parents posed restrictions on their mobility due to an overlap between crimes against women and crimes against Muslims. Sidrah, a 14-year-old girl, expressed extreme frustration, saying, “It freaks us out...after the Asifa, Nirbhaya, and Priyanka rape cases⁴ it has become really difficult to get out of the house, the Government know everything but they don't take action...in the Nirbhaya case the rapists are being given so many chances for a mercy plea, even in the Asifa case nothing happened even after so many protests.” Girls’ vulnerability was intensified as they could be easily identified as Muslim through obviously visible markers like the *hijab* (headscarf) or *niqab* (face veil). For both boys and girls, a limited sense of agency was also extended to their future lives. Many said that they would not be able to choose a job of their choice as they expect to be discriminated against if they seek employment in India or while procuring visas if they wish to travel to western countries. At the same time, this restricted agency motivated children to take up professions to help the community. Some were already engaged in community-related social work during the weekends wherein they helped adults. Haider, a 14-year-old boy, said, “I want to become a lawyer because of the injustices happening so that I can help others, Muslims are not there in good positions.” In this sense, children also understood agency as age-bound— they hoped their agency within a marginalizing context would expand when they become adults.

Indian Muslim childhoods are not only impacted by their local ‘othering’ contexts but also by the global discourses on Islamophobia and stereotypes of terrorism. On the one hand ‘adultification’ of children (Webster 2021) makes them vulnerable to hate crimes. On the other hand, this makes their parents more protective of them. Due to this conundrum, children’s ability to exercise their agency gets limited especially in a context wherein nationalistic discourses are powerful and

exposure to hate crimes is high. Factors like gender and present or absent adults further result in spaces of greater or lesser perceived safety that impinge upon their agency. At times, this becomes juxtaposed with the perception of a ‘temporal’ agency which implies that their ability to act could increase as they transition into adulthood. Thus, for those researching the Global South there is a need to be mindful that agency revolves around and overlaps with several axes of social differences or inequalities that are micro (due to age, gender, class, race, religion and caste) and macro (conflict/war, political unrest, economic crises, displacement/migration, climate change). Yet, a nuanced attention to agency allows childhood researchers to capture the complexity of how children find ways to resist oppressive structures as they create their own lifeworlds and futures within diverse local contexts.

Endnotes

¹ In the Asifa case, according to the police chargesheet, the crime had a dual motive—first was personal revenge, and the second was to intimidate the Muslim community living in the area. The main accused was the temple priest and others included his son, his nephew, and four policemen. Several protests were held condemning the crime. At the same time, right-wing groups, including ministers held protests demanding the release of the accused.

² The Citizenship Amendment Act (former bill) passed in 2019 resulted in nationwide protests as it was regarded discriminatory based on religion—it excluded only Muslims. It also instilled fear that Indian Muslims would be required to prove their citizenship, in the absence of which they would become stateless and put into detention camps.

³ Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper to protect the identity of the participants

⁴ Nirbhaya rape case refers to the gang rape, brutal torture and murder of a 22-year-old woman in Delhi in 2012. The incident resulted in nationwide protests demanding justice and drew international attention. Similarly, in 2019, the gang rape and murder of Priyanka Reddy, a 26-year-old doctor, near Hyderabad evoked public outrage and protests. Both these women were not Muslim.

References

- Aguilar, John L. 1981. “Insider Research: An Ethnography of a Debate.” In *Anthropologists at Home in North America: Methods and Issues in the Study of One’s Own Society*, edited by Donald Messerschmidt, 15-26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bordonaro, Lorenzo I., and Ruth Payne. 2012. “Ambiguous Agency: Critical Perspectives on Social Interventions with Children and Youth in Africa.” *Children’s Geographies* 10 (4): 365–372.
- Chakrabarty, Bidyut, and Bhuwan Kumar Jha. 2020. *Hindu Nationalism in India: Ideology and Politics*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

- Durham, Deborah. 2008. "Apathy and Agency. The Romance of Agency and Youth in Botswana." In *Figuring the Future. Globalization and the Temporalities of Children and Youth*, edited by Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham, 151–178. Santa Fe : School for Advanced Research Press.
- Elkassam, Siham, Rick Csiernik, Andrew Mantulak, Gina Kayssi, Yasmine Hussain, Kathryn Lambert, Pamela Bailey, and Asad Choudhary. 2018. "Growing Up Muslim: The Impact of Islamophobia on Children in a Canadian Community." *Journal of Muslim Mental Health*, 12 (1): 3-18.
- Esser, Florian, Meike S. Baader, Tanja Betz, and Beatrice Hungerland. eds. 2016. *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Farooqui, Jannat Fatima, and Archana Kaushik. 2020. "Situational Analysis of Muslim Children in the Face of Islamophobia: Theoretical Frameworks, Experiences, and School Social Work Interventions." In *Working with Muslim Clients in the Helping Professions*, edited by Anisah Bagasra and Mitchell Mackinem, 96-116. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Hammersley, Martyn and Paul Atkinson. 2007. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hanson, Karl, Tatek Abebe, Stuart C. Aitken, Sarada Balagopalan, and Samantha Punch. 2018. "Global/Local' Research on Children and Childhood in a 'Global Society.'" *Childhood* 25 (3): 272-296.
- Honwana, Alcinda. 2005. "Innocent and Guilty: Child-Soldiers as Interstitial and Tactical Agents." In *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, edited by Alcinda Honwana and Filip de Boeck, 31– 52. Oxford: James Currey.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2021. *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Klocker, Natascha. 2007. "An Example of Thin Agency: Child Domestic Workers in Tanzania." In *Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood and Youth: Young Rural Lives*, edited by Ruth Panelli, Samantha Punch, and Elsbeth Robson, 81–148. London: Routledge.
- Narayan, Kirin. 1993. "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist." *American Anthropologist* 95(3): 671–86.
- Prout, Alan, and Allison James. 1997. "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems." In *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, (2nd rev. ed), edited by Allison James and Alan Prout, 7-32. London: Falmer Press.

Robson, Elsbeth, Stephen Bell, and Natascha Klocker. 2007. "Conceptualizing Agency in the Lives and Actions of Rural Young People." In *Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood and Youth: Young Rural Lives*, edited by Ruth Panelli, Samantha Punch, and Elsbeth Robson, 81–148. London: Routledge.

Sen, Hia. 2016. "Do the "Mollycoddled" Act? Children, Agency and Disciplinary Entanglements in India". In *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*, edited by Esser, Florian, Meike S. Baader, Tanja Betz, and Beatrice Hungerland, 393-419. London: Routledge.

White, Sarah C., and Shyamol. A Choudhury. 2010. "Children's Participation in Bangladesh: Issues of Agency and Structures of Violence." In *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation*, edited by Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas, 39–50. London: Routledge.

Webster, Crystal. "White Americans Have Weaponized the Idea of Girlhood." *The Washington Post*, January 22, 2021. Accessed February 15, 2022.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/01/22/white-americans-have-weaponized-idea-girlhood/>

Author contact: Shaima Amatullah, MSc, PhD Student (National Institute of Advanced Studies), shaima.amatullah@gmail.com; Shalini Dixit, PhD (National Institute of Advanced Studies), shalinidixit3@nias.res.in

To cite this article: Amatullah, Shaima and Shalini Dixit. 2022. "Muslim Children's Agency Amidst Hate Crimes and Right-wing Nationalism in India." *NEOS* 14 (1).

To link to this article: <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol14iss1sp22/amatullahdixit/>