



Book Review

Kalyani Devaki Menon. (2022). *Making Place for Muslims in Contemporary India*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. Pp. xiii+196. Price: \$ 5.70. ISBN: 9781501760594. PDF

Deepra Dandekar

Researcher, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin

Email: deepradandekar@gmail.com

Making Place for Muslims in Contemporary India is a poignant and brilliant book on Muslim religious minorities in Old Delhi and their efforts at social, historical, and political place-making in contemporary India—an India that is increasingly defined by Hindu nationalist politics. The book’s introductory blurb already suggests the various conundrums encompassed in such a place-making enterprises, when saying: “Places do not simply exist. They are made and remade by the acts of individuals and communities at particular historical moments.” Exemplary and excellently argued with mastery, *Making Place for Muslims* can be hailed for its applicability as an interpretive model, useful for similar research on the status, treatment, and condition of other postcolonial religious minorities in the Global South—communities produced as minorities based on their religious affiliation.

Based on extensive ethnography with the Muslim residents of the Old (walled) city of Delhi, also known by its Mughal name of *Shahjahanabad*, Menon demonstrates how the precarity of Muslim everyday life in India and the development of their social and religious life in contemporary times is minutely associated with rising Hindu nationalist hostility. Menon’s respondents—residents of Old Delhi—many of whom have been in Old Delhi for many decades, not only struggle with their largely-middle class, performative identities that aim at being ‘good’ Muslims; they also negotiated gender and class exploitation—low-wages for intense and arduous labour within the supply-chain network of a transnational global economy that only increased their vulnerability.

Well-aware of their pejoratively articulated identity as ‘Muslim’ in postcolonial India, residents of Old Delhi resist assimilation into the Hindu mainstream by tightening the borders of their religious identity ever more. However, even while they do so, they simultaneously also engage and participate in multiple tolerant and transcending spaces that absorb internal differences with other Muslim groups to build an inclusive defence against Hindu nationalist attack—“cultural commons” as Visweswaran argued in 2010. This is nevertheless a complex subject position that is difficult to sustain and negotiate. Menon aptly demonstrates how Old Delhi residents yearn to remake and renew their identity by resetting it within older and more cosmopolitan moulds that hark back to a historical imagination *Shahjahanabad*—a nostalgia and retrotopia that according to Bauman (2017) is a future-less state where an imagined past is the only way to reconstitute an imagined future. Menon’s respondents in Old Delhi, unable to look forward to a future that will ever include them, look back at the cosmopolitan past of *Shahjahanabad* instead, set in the Mughal times. It was not the religious segregation between Hindus and Muslims that built individual and community identity back then,

but it was a past, wherein identity was defined by diversity itself generated by being part of the city. This retrotopia has agency, and as Menon writes (p. 4):

...histories of a city and empire in which religious identity did not determine political belonging, and where cultural traditions of friendship transcend religious boundaries. In so doing, they make place for Muslims by disrupting majoritarian constructions of India as a Hindu place that positions upper-caste Hindus as the normative national subject.



Image 15.1: Men and Women at the Jama Masjid for Shab-e-Barat. Image Source: Kalyani Devaki Menon

Making Place for Muslims is divided into five chapters, and apart from the *Introduction* and *Conclusion*, these five chapters are divided into two parts that are called *Landscapes of Equality* and *Making Place*. While *Landscapes of Equality* consists of two chapters: *A Place for Muslims* and *Gender and Precarity*, the *Making Place* section consists of the last three chapters: *Perfecting the Self*, *Living with Difference*, and *Life after Death*. The first chapter (*A Place for Muslims*) explores how the walled city has increasingly become a place of safety for Muslims. In a scenario that blames all Muslims for being violent, Old Delhi for Muslims is that one historical place that provides residents with a sense of everyday acceptance. This acceptance, however, does not simply take place in according to a default mode; ghettoization is also encouraged as it produces opportunities for better surveillance and control of religious minorities (Appadurai 1996). Describing her understanding of Muslim place-making in Old Delhi, Menon writes (pp. 35):

I argue that these feelings of insecurity are engendered by a powerful politics of belonging that excludes Muslims from the national imagery, compelling those I worked with to challenge their displacement by crafting a place for themselves in Old Delhi...even as Muslims contest their erasure from the national imagery and assert their presence on the national landscape by making place for themselves in neighbourhoods in Old Delhi, they simultaneously acquiesce to a national cartography that enables their continued marginalization in contemporary India. Indeed, they are both “secure” and “secured” in Old Delhi, since their actions are ineluctably linked to discourses of nation and security that render some places inhospitable to Muslims while “securing” them in others.

This fixing or securing of Muslims in Old Delhi does not, on the other hand, produce its residents as financially self-sufficient. By the very fact that the walled city is a ghetto that stigmatizes its residents as Muslim, Old Delhi becomes increasingly depleted of good-quality financial, educational, and care-giving networks, services, amenities, and opportunities like schools, offices, hospitals etc. These facilities have in recent times increasingly moved out of Old Delhi due to the stigma that being Muslim incurs in contemporary India. The second chapter of the book (*Gender and Precarity*) in fact discusses this problem more explicitly, showing how the movement of marginalized Muslim families into Muslim neighbourhoods in Old Delhi, simultaneously compounds their precarity and increases their impoverishment. Traced through stories of women who work in the hand-embroidered brocade-making industry (*zardozi*) that serve local bridal-wear markets, those who work in transnational supply-chain networks as *supari* (betel-nut) cutters, or those engaged in more stigmatized, informal labour based on qualitative exchange, the second chapter of the book outlines how the continuous marginalization of Muslims in postcolonial India forces many into increasing vulnerability contextualized in the absence of labour rights. This informalization has forced women to move into the labour market, who work long hours at labour intensive tasks without much remuneration. Menon calls the situation a “crisis of reproduction” (p. 62) that is increasingly laced with domestic rituals of wish fulfilment (*niyas*) especially among smaller groups of Shias in Old Delhi, who are hindered by an even smaller network. Describing how these cross-cutting vulnerabilities produce the Muslim identity of Old Delhi residents as increasingly intersectional, Menon defines the urgent task at hand as (p. 81):

We have to examine how their religious identity intersects with other identities—as women, as labourers, as artisans, as migrants, as friends, as neighbours, as creditors, as debtors, as patients, as graduates, as daughters, and as wives—all of which affect their positioning in different ways and shape how they will traverse the social, economic, and political forces operating in contemporary India.

But despite marginalization, Muslim women from Old Delhi are hardly passive victims. The next three chapters of the book contained in the part two of the book (*Making Place*) demonstrate without doubt, how Muslim women respond to their marginalization by both consolidating as well as relaxing the boundaries of their religious identities. In the third chapter (*Perfecting the Self*), Menon explores the emergence of *dawa*

activities in Old Delhi, that she calls the “Muslim Club” (p. 85). Not part of any *maslak*, and identifying mostly with the teachings of Muslim televangelist Zakir Naik, members of the Muslim Club seek an “authentic” Islam, remaining critical of Shias and other Sunnis who follow the Deobandi or Barelvi *maslak*. Insisting on the inculcation of Muslim “foundational texts”, women members of the Muslim Club are specially critical of the imbrication of Indian “culture” and “tradition” within Islam that for them, serves to erode away its “authenticity” represented by Prophet Mohammad alone. Constituting a performative identity, the women member of the Muslim Club are acutely aware of the Islamophobia awaiting them in the Hindu and global mainstream, and hence, Menon contextualizes their *dawa* activities—of becoming ideal and modern Muslims in the complexities and tensions of modernity itself that is encompassed by the intersecting vicissitudes of Global Islam and Modernity in India. While the women of the Muslim Club challenge Islamophobia, their piety can also be understood as a form of place making: “an assertion of presence in a country that is increasingly inhospitable to Muslims” (p. 98). Since the fashioning of their self-identity and selfhood is an ongoing process “...that operates in the context of competing hegemonies, conflicting aspirations, and complex sociopolitical forces” (p. 106), their audience also needs “...to situate their words and deeds within the sociopolitical context of their performance” (p. 113).

Menon explores how the emergence of strong religious boundaries among members of the Muslim Club that perform good Muslim-ness is contextualized within Hindu nationalist politics in the everyday. In chapter five (*Life after Death*), Menon describes the unfortunate event of a close respondent’s husband’s death in Old Delhi that becomes transformed into a site of social and religious contestation, as differences of opinion break out among mourners. Contesting what encompasses an ideal form of mourning among Muslims, Menon writes how “the divergent views expressed about how to appropriately mourn reflect constructions of religious subjectivity, womanhood, and Islam among Old Delhi’s Muslims” (p. 138) is a form of community consolidation.

Mourning here reconstructs the individual and community lives of all those who survive death, with the site of mourning constituting a powerful context that re-creates as well as transcends the sectarian differences between mourners. Menon adds here: “mourning practices can bear the traces of the city’s cosmopolitan pasts and anxious presents” that “enable alternative forms of subjectification...” (ibid.), that allow women to make bonds with each other within the exclusionary space of Hindu nationalist politics. For “it is amid these historical forces that individuals forge understandings of self and belonging, envision religious identity and practice, and live their everyday lives” (p. 139). In this chapter, Menon makes an important point about the limited scope of “cultural commons” as a universal idea. Living together in intimacy with the ‘Other’ can threaten modern, exclusive identities, where alternative and temporally-limited communities are as quickly formed, just as they are dissolved, becoming sites of struggle that simultaneously ameliorate the same struggle they serve to create. And this only further demonstrates how “communities, of course, can include and forge connections even as they exclude and articulate disjuncture and difference” (p. 147). Mourning sites hence constitute complex places where the residents of Old Delhi try not only “to be good Muslims, they also aspire to be other things—good parents, good teachers, good workers, good women, good friends, good citizens, good neighbours,

and occasionally, good communists” (p. 155). This transforms mourning rituals into an arena that produces belonging to place, and the making of place.

Though the struggle about difference and boundaries are most poignant when highlighted at instances of personal bereavement, these boundaries and their dissipation is strongly underscored in the performance of Shia mourning in Old Delhi during the Muharram festival as well, that Menon describes in chapter four (*Living with Difference*). Though the history of Shia-Sunni Muharram clashes is well-known for North India, the same mourning processions in Old Delhi are differently coloured, and tolerated by Sunnis as part of their solidarity and inclusivity shown towards other grieving Muslims (cf. Dandekar 2022). While Shias and Sunnis are aware of their mutual sectarian differences, they also live in a common environment of marginalization, exclusionary politics, and violence. It is in this context that Hindu or even Sunni participation within mourning, produces an inclusive community that powerfully, embrace difference. While many of Menon’s respondents refused to speak about Shia-Sunni communal tensions, she interprets their refusal as a sign of how Muslim communities internally engender an everyday form of peace-building while living with difference, inside Old Delhi. It is this sense of an intimacy with the Other, and Otherness that is foundational to peaceful coexistence, even if this intimacy is threatening at times. As Menon explains it (pp. 134):

Ultimately, living with difference is about making place for oneself and one’s community in a world shared with others. As they interact with “others” from different religious, sectarian, or class backgrounds, and as they find themselves emotionally or financially involved or dependent on them, individuals construct narratives that transcend difference, even if only momentarily and inconsistently.

Clearly outlining the conundrums faced by religious minorities in a postcolonial world marked by a decline in secularism, *Making Place for Muslims* is a significant book, constituting cutting-edge research for scholars interested in Hindu-Muslim relations in India and South Asia. Written powerfully, the book is an eye-opener. Aptly concluding the book’s arguments using Menon’s own words (p. 161):

I have argued in this book that although secularization discourses, Islamophobia, prejudice, and violence have “secured” Muslims in places like Old Delhi, and while economic forces capitalize on the politics of religion, class, caste, gender, and place to make some rich at the expense of others, people continue to live, love, and built community in the face of marginalization, alienation, and dispossession. Some articulate transnational religious communities that defy the singular and insular claims of the nation-state...some highlight boundaries and difference, making themselves visible and lying claim to place in a country in which violent disavowals of Islam and Muslims are increasingly frequent, and valorised. Other narrate religious histories, cultures, identities, and communities that disrupt religious and sectarian boundaries and forge community across bitter divides. And still others engage in rituals of belonging that resist understandings of religious

identity as mutually exclusive, rooting people in place against the tide of Hindu chauvinism and exclusionary understandings of nation and belonging.

As is obvious, *Making Place for Muslims* is also a political enterprise that is critical of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India. It is also an emotional treatise about loving relationships between Hindus and Muslims, and an exercise of empathy for religious minorities in the Global South—in this particular case, with the marginalized Muslim residents of Old Delhi. On the other hand, there are, however, no dissenting voices here that challenge the author's narrative, and the narratives of her respondents. Given the excessive political pressure posed by Hindu nationalist politics, would one not consider the emergence of Muslim opportunistic voices that support Hindu nationalist politics through the general rubric of postcolonial patriotism? How would their narratives complicate the spatialized dichotomy of the Muslim survival mode that produces *Shahjahanabad* as a modern ghetto for minorities in New Delhi? Would supporting Hindu nationalist politics and becoming part of its machinery, out of even the most utilitarian of motivations, not be seen as serving to uplift Muslim poverty and marginalization? Or would such exercising such utilitarian motives harbour and produce greater complexity and even danger for Muslim home-making, place-making, and belonging?

Making Place for Muslims in Contemporary India is a wonderful and compassionately written book that reaches out to its readers with empathy. Recommending it for undergraduates and postgraduates alike, I would further endorse the book to be a great resource for all researchers interested in contemporary India. Written in the simple but yet greatly informative way, *Making Place* constitutes a serious academic and political analysis of our times.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2017). *Retrotopia*. Malden (MA, USA) and Cambridge (UK): Polity Press.
- Dandekar, D. (2022). "An Ethnographic Exploration of Muharram(s) in Pune, Maharashtra," pp. 34-40, in P. Sohoni, T. Tschacher (eds.) *Non-Shia Practices of Muharram in South Asia and the Diaspora: Beyond Mourning*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Visweswaran, K. (2010). *Uncommon Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference*. Durham: Duke University Press.