Beyond Charity: Poverty, Gender, and Local Islam in Contemporary India

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Beyond Charity: Poverty, Gender, and Local Islam in Contemporary India

A dissertation presented by
Danielle Widmann Abraham
to
Harvard Divinity School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Theology in the subject of
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Beyond Charity: Poverty, Gender, and Local Islam
in Contemporary India

Abstract

This ethnographic study of contemporary Muslim poverty alleviation projects in India investigates how Islamic social ethics are brought to bear on efforts to redress the social suffering of poverty. Drawing on field research in Hyderabad, one of many cities that experienced Hindu-Muslim riots after the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the present study demonstrates that confronting social suffering has propelled the creation of new public spaces and experimental social practices. Within such spaces, local understandings of Islamic ethics, gender formation, inter-religious relations, and religious authority are elaborated in such a way as to reshape lived social relations. The projects studied demonstrate that Muslims counter social suffering by drawing on the longstanding commitment to charity and care of the vulnerable that are the hallmarks of Islamic social ethics, and simultaneously reformulate this tradition in light of contemporary concerns about communal violence and gender justice. Focusing on diverse Muslim poverty alleviation projects within the same urban area, this study demonstrates that there is no monolithic Islamic response to poverty. Rather than a single ethical code that organizes all Muslim poverty alleviation efforts, practical interventions are shown to be the result of particular interpretations of Islamic tradition, suffering, and gender that cluster together to support emergent notions of wellbeing.
These emergent social projects further demonstrate that poverty localizes Islam.

The effort to alleviate poverty frames a creative field in which ways of being Muslim are contested, embodied, and engaged through the frame of local tradition. In such local spaces, Islam is elaborated in such a way as to support an alternative sociality. Religion is inflected to ensure that which binds people in everyday life is something other than violence, subordination, fragmentation, deprivation, and suffering. As Muslim poverty alleviation projects shape modes of belonging to others, and work to inhibit the formation of zones of social sacrifice, they simultaneously construct nonviolent social practices and gender reforms as expressions of local Islam.
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Dedicated to Iqbal Monani, who opened her home ‘Sukoon’ to me,

and to my daughter Fiona, who opens up new worlds.
Verily never
will God change the condition
of a people until they
change it themselves.

_Qur’an, xiii, 11_

Not so long ago, the tragedy was to be exploited and the horizon of liberation consisted in freeing oneself from exploitation. Today, the tragedy is not to be exploited, but to be utterly deprived of the basic means to move, to partake in the general distribution of things and resources necessary to produce a semblance of life.

_Achille Mbembe_

The word of God needs an interpretation which does not totally restrict human freedom.

_Alam Khundmiri_
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My family never wavered in their support and put up with my absences – sometimes physical, sometimes mental – out of faith that this was something worth doing. I thank them for their humor and affection. They make me feel lucky and more resilient. My husband Mathew’s constancy and strength throughout this long effort was just slightly short of miraculous. Finally, my daughter Fiona arrived and gave me the opportunity to find new rhythms. She made it possible for me to finish this project, so it is dedicated to her, with fullest gratitude.
Note on Translation and Transliteration

I have retained the popular form of Arabic words as they are commonly used in everyday discourse in English (both in India and elsewhere) without diacritical marks, such as zakat and madrasa. This allows for simplicity of transliteration while also acknowledging that the presence of such words in non-Arabic contexts marks the way in which Islamic traditions have spread across geographical and cultural territories. When quoting transliterated Arabic words in the works of others, I have retained the original diacritical marks.

All translations of oral communication are my own, based on notes written in the course of field research or from recorded conversations.
Chapter 1

Re-introducing Poverty

In 2005, the Government of India appointed a special committee to investigate the socio-economic conditions of the country’s Muslim population. Headed by the former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, Rajinder Sachar, the committee gathered data about the social, economic, and educational condition of Indian Muslims. Based on a nation-wide compilation of surveys from various government agencies, their final report concluded that compared with other Indians, Muslims now constitute the country’s single poorest demographic group. Muslims suffer higher rates of poverty, unmet basic needs, inequality, and the relative lack of opportunities, rewards, and power. The report marked a turning point on the part of the state, and formally confirmed what many Indian Muslims already knew. After years of steady commitment on the part of the state to eradicate widespread hunger and provide education to combat illiteracy, the postcolonial Indian state had not succeeded in tackling poverty in a systematic or even way. Certainly, there has been progress in reducing poverty, but such progress was and remains uneven, marking improvements for some and remaining an unfulfilled promise for others.

Current patterns of inequality in India still obtain from the period of colonialism. David Ludden notes the four prominent patterns that emerged in imperial history still structure inequality in India today through differences in location, gender, ethnicity, and

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class. Muslims as a diverse demographic group in India experience inequality across all four of these modes, and are included collectively in this rubric as an ‘ethnic’ group. All groups that have trailed in the wake of development have suffered intensified inequality. Yet relative to other demographic groups in India, Muslims experience the highest rate of absolute poverty. As India became the world’s fourth largest economy in the era of globalized capitalism, its Muslim minority has yet to benefit from the realization of greater prosperity. They have been left to struggle to avail themselves of the greater goods that the state should guarantee: food, education, infrastructure, sanitation, and security. After national independence and years of state policy targeted at improving the viability of its most vulnerable citizens, Muslims have emerged as India’s new untouchables.

This study investigates how the conditions of poverty affect the everyday religious life of Indian Muslim communities. Drawing on ethnographic research in the city of Hyderabad, I present three contemporary poverty alleviation projects, tracing the ways that local Islamic traditions are brought to bear in efforts to confront social suffering. Each of the projects studied addresses poverty and inequality as a fundamental social problem in two senses. First, poverty and inequality are seen as a crucial issue for society, a source of suffering and distress that causes collective pain and instability. Secondly, these projects approach poverty and inequality through the domain of the social, the everyday lived human relations that we come to sense as our ‘world.’ My analysis of Muslim poverty alleviation projects reveals that confronting social suffering

in India has propelled the creation of new and experimental public spaces for the elaboration of Islamic understandings of ethics, gender, inter-religious relations, and religious authority. Given the complex processes that structure poverty and inequality, these projects invoke Islamic traditions as they identify crucial forms of belonging that counter suffering. They show how Muslims alleviate poverty through projects that work to instantiate communities of care. There is no “trans-historical definition of ‘care’” that can be used to speak of all times and places, and rather than imposing one here, I present the affects bonds and social ideals held to be important in each of the case study projects, as a way to inductively describe functional care.\textsuperscript{3} Together, these three projects demonstrate that there is no monolithic Islamic response to poverty, for even within a single urban location, Muslims create diverse projects to redress poverty, each of which simultaneously affirms unique elements of a distinctly local understanding of Islamic tradition.

This study makes an ethnographic contribution to the broader study of poverty as a concern in Muslim societies. I draw on scholarship of Islam in South Asia as well women and gender in Islam in order to highlight the continual recreation of religious tradition in contemporary contexts. This chapter surveys the study of poverty in Islam in order to chart the enduring significance of charity as a modality for engaging poverty both historically and in the contemporary period. I then discuss the presentation of poverty as a problem for modernity, as a way of framing the specific instantiation of poverty alleviation in the contemporary world, which includes the modality of charity but

also goes beyond it. The particular legacies of Islam in South Asia are discussed to contextualize this ethnography within broader religious, cultural, and historical trajectories. Scholarly inquiry about women and gender in Islam is presented to further understanding about Muslim poverty alleviation in contemporary India, which reflects broader efforts across Muslim societies to improve women’s status. Finally, I describe the ethnographic situation of this study, and argue that ethnographies of poverty need to take seriously the subordination, sometimes multiple, of specific groups of people, and disaggregate ‘the poor’ as an analytical category. This opens up questions as to how people sense that their suffering and their wellbeing are linked with others. In addition to its material determination, poverty is a matter of social suffering. While individuals and the efforts they make to improve their personal circumstances are significant, this study looks at collective efforts to change the circumstances of poverty in order to trace the forms of sociality that Muslims in Hyderabad believe support their mutual wellbeing.

The Topos of Poverty in the Study of Islam

Poverty as a subject of inquiry in the study of Islam is approached largely through the religious obligation of charity. Both obligatory charity, zakat, and voluntary giving, sadaqa, hold a prominent place in Islamic theology, in which the giving of assistance is a pious act enjoined by scripture and tradition. As one of the five pillars of Islam, zakat is an obligation incumbent upon believers. Rather than expressing an affective bond between people, subject to the personal qualities of a relationship, zakat is commanded by God and so falls properly under the acts of piety involved in worship. The Qur’an
repeatedly pairs zakat with prayer, making it clear that prayer and charity mutually complete each other. Thus giving to the poor is one of the foundational acts of worship, shaping the relationship of human beings to God as it places collective human bonds under the purview of divine command. Zakat was instrumental to unifying the nascent community of believers in the earliest period of Islam history, and has continued to serve as a focal point for understanding the social significance of wealth and ideals of generosity. From the inception of Islam, the obligation to give zakat to the poor and needy establishes ethical care for others as a necessary dimension of being Muslim.

Scholarly treatment of obligatory charity has addressed the conceptualization of poverty inherent in zakat, defining those people who are recognized as lawful recipients of charity. Islamic tradition recognizes that poverty has encompassed both absolute poverty, the lack of necessities, and relative poverty, such as differences of status, subjective claims of need, and loss of earlier means of provision. In contemporary terms, the foundational texts of Islam recognize both poverty and inequality, including categories of people whose social identity makes them more vulnerable, such as widows and orphans. Besides identifying recipients of charity, the early Islamic literature sought

to clarify the conditions of giving, including the minimum qualifications of wealth.\textsuperscript{10} Islamic scholars such as al-Ghazzali addressed the mechanics of giving zakat along with the internal state of the giver, thus solidifying the connection between the spiritual and material dimensions of charity.\textsuperscript{11}

Voluntary giving broadens the category of charity to account for acts of personal generosity and beneficence, which are also repeatedly encouraged in the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{12} Such altruistic and philanthropic acts integrate the maintenance of social bonds into devotional repertoires. Philanthropy also extends into patronage of projects for the common good and public works that solidify religious identity and state power. Islamic social history of charity and philanthropic endowments explores the multiple ways that the use of power and wealth for the public good shaped Muslim societies for generations.

The study of poverty and charity for the historical understanding of Muslim societies shifts from the theological explication of zakat to consideration of ‘the poor’ as a category for social analysis. Recent historical studies have examined how philanthropy on a broad scale shaped notions of social welfare across Muslim societies. In the mid 1990s, scholars Amy Singer, Michael Bonner, and Mine Ener organized a research project on poverty and charity in Middle Eastern societies.\textsuperscript{13} Their joint efforts resulted in the publication of monographs that ensure that poverty and charity will henceforth remain an enduring focus for investigating the social history of Muslim societies.

\textsuperscript{12} Q 107.
\textsuperscript{13} Michael Bonner, Mine Ener and Amy Singer, eds, Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).
Focusing on the investigation of imarets, Ottoman public kitchens, Singer’s work demonstrates that multifaceted structures for the public distribution of food developed a medieval welfare society that presaged the emergence of a modern welfare state. The Ottoman public kitchen shows how food distribution involves multiple domains of power and status and thus reveals how infrastructure to help the poor materializes expectations about social order.

From the requirement of providing basic necessities in the early Muslim community of Muhammad’s time, poverty has occasioned an ongoing conversation in Muslim societies regarding the definition of need and how to meet it. Bonner’s work investigates how the classical sources of Islamic tradition define poverty and the complementary understanding of wealth, looking at the concern for the poor as a force for integrating the early Muslim community. Ener’s investigation into early modern Egyptian public policy on poverty builds on the foundational work of Adam Sabra, whose study of Mamluk Egypt describes how the meaning and definition of poverty and almsgiving became a matter of social debate in medieval cities of Muslim societies. Through his analysis of public begging and philanthropic endowments, Sabra argues that the responses to poverty – defined by the recorded need for food, housing, and clothing – on the part of private individuals and the state were an ambivalent combination of self-interest, disregard, and the desire for moral legitimacy. Acts of charity, Sabra shows,

created a safety net but were not intended to improve the condition of poverty itself. Addressing a later period of Egyptian history, Ener draws on the availability of a larger number of sources for early-nineteenth-century Egypt to describe how the poor availed themselves of “avenues of care” in the context of shifting state involvement and social attitudes about poor relief. The history of poverty and charity in Islamic societies between the medieval and early modern period marks the emergence of the poor as public actors and the gradual development of the state from beneficent patronage to a concern for social welfare. The history of charity and poverty in Islam thus moves from individual acts of piety that purified the giver and supported the recipient, to collective acts of patronage for public works and institutions, and finally to the integration of social welfare as a modality of state power.

Studies of charity in the modern period further deepen the view that giving to the poor provides an important focus for looking at the structure of social and political power. Three features distinguish charity and philanthropy in modern Muslim societies: a greater engagement with the state, a heightened concern with the past, and the emergence of new social fissures that segment modern societies. Beginning in the colonial period and continuing through to the present day, influential Islamic scholars in the modern period have presented zakat as a key element of an alternate modernity. In such views, zakat and the complementary institution of Islamic economics are presented as

instrumental in countering poverty while also shaping the economic sphere along an ‘authentically’ Muslim model in contrast with the increasing influence of ‘the West.’ Discourse about charity and social welfare was produced through deeply contested conversations about the role of Islam in shaping society. For many scholars of Islam writing about charity in the modern period, zakat was a practice rooted in membership of the Muslim community and was imagined as a “powerful equalizer” in society. Thus the desire to live in a political order that was identifiably Islamic served as one source for conversations about the role of zakat in promoting the public good and providing a link with Muslim societies across Islamic history.

Islamic tradition influenced the development of modern states to varying degrees. Few states with Muslim majority populations implemented the formal and centralized collection of zakat, and for those that did, the results did not always serve the pious and practical purposes that have been ascribed to charity in the religious literature. In some places where zakat donation was compulsory, many people differentiated between that charity which circulated in the (often corrupt) bureaucracies of the state and that charity


which remained under the purview of personal generosity and care.\textsuperscript{23} In other places, such as Pakistan for example, despite state institutionalization most people did not pay zakat, while the analysis of those who did demonstrated that rather than redistributing wealth amongst vertically differentiated groups, it was mostly the poor who helped the poor.\textsuperscript{24}

The institutionalization of religious charity within the state further segmented the collective identity of the poor, as institutional zakat could be used to help those in chronic or structural poverty, but did little to help those whose personal circumstances collapsed as they experienced episodic immiseration, or ‘conjunctural’ poverty.\textsuperscript{25} In some urban areas, public policy regulating the movement of people through public space meant that certain categories of people were inhibited from gaining access to resources designated for the poor. Paupers, beggars, vagrants, solitary women, fugitive slaves, and unskilled workers migrating to cities in search of work were all people who “lived on the margins” of society and so “found themselves in the margins of charity as well.”\textsuperscript{26} Further complicating the ways that charity shaped the understanding of who was poor and vulnerable, public kitchens endowed to help the poor were frequently used by religious functionaries, such as people who would recite the Qur’an and pray for benefactors in exchange for material aid.\textsuperscript{27} The history of Islamic charity and philanthropy in the

\textsuperscript{25} Eyal Ginio, “Living on the Margins of Charity: Coping with Poverty in an Ottoman Provincial City,” in Bonner et al 165-184.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. 170.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
modern period therefore reflects how social definitions of status, and not necessarily poverty, influenced the provision of resources.

Within the study of Islamic charity and philanthropy, new issues emerge in scholarship on the post-9/11 period. Recent studies draw on analytical categories that are unique to the configuration of national and international power that characterizes the current period of global capitalism and terror. Many of the issues addressed come out of state-based analyses that are interested in exploring the scope of the state, its moral legitimacy, and changes in the international coordination of states. The role of civil society and Islamist movements across diverse Muslim societies are two (occasionally overlapping) areas of social change that are addressed in contemporary studies of Islamic charity and philanthropy. Analyses of Islamism and civil society at the national level are complemented by analyses of how the coordination of international relations affects the configuration of Islamic charity at all levels – global, national, and local.

Recent studies of contemporary Islamic charity chronicle the growth of civil society as a force shaping philanthropic efforts. The formation of “Islamic Social Institutions” as part of “moderate” Islamist movements in the Middle East is one case in which social welfare intersects with the formation of political parties and the increasing emphasis on piety as a form of public engagement. Janine Clark shows that while many assume the “successful provision of services by the middle class to the poor” will “result in growing number of adherents to Islamic movements at the street or the ballot box,” what actually happens is that horizontal social ties are solidified among the middle class,

who, as in the example above, avail themselves of the resources offered by these new Islamic social institutions. They do so not because they are poor or destitute but because the social institutions started by Islamist movements have a greater organizational capacity to mobilize human resources compared to the state. Rather than focusing solely on supporting the poor in accessing the basic amenities of life, charity and philanthropic social institutions actually serve a very broad range of people. This is the case in part because the state has proved ineffective in the widespread provision of resources, and in part because the signification of positive social practices as Islamic has widespread appeal. For the middle-class, participation in Islamic social institutions – going to health clinics or educational camps run by organizations affiliated with Islamist political parties – offers the chance to avail themselves of resources, and in so doing have what the organizations present as a holistic Islamic experience, one that is simultaneously fully social, fully pious, fully moral, and fully political.

Religious practices of charity have also been extended and adapted in recent years so as to be included in what is now called ‘the philanthropic sector.’ Influenced by capitalist discourses of corporate social responsibility, some “private citizens” are now motivated “to commit resources for the greater public welfare.” Particulariy in countries in the Gulf, where extractive industries have generated significant amounts of wealth and where civil society remains relatively weak, the establishment of “operating foundations” to provide services and “grant-making foundations” to provide resources for others to

\[\text{\protect\footnotesize{29 Ibid. 43.}}\]
\[\text{\protect\footnotesize{30 Ibid. 61.}}\]
\[\text{\protect\footnotesize{31 Barbara Lethem Ibrahim and Dina Sherif, eds., From Charity to Social Change: Trends in Arab Philanthropy (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2008) 2.}}\]
provide services constitutes a new influence on public life.  

The creation of other institutional forms besides “religiously-mandated donations” carries the promise of greater “continuity, impact, [and] professionalism.”  

This philanthropic sector differs from Islamic social institutions described above in that these institutions are not affiliated with any political party. Furthermore, in contrast to the holistic Islamic experience promised by Islamism, individuals and institutions within the philanthropic sector attempt to inscribe the social in distinction from the political, and reinforce the sense of society as the proper arena for expressing religious sentiment rather than religious ideology.

The changes brought about by the rise of Islamism and the formation of philanthropy as social ‘sector’ could be seen in terms of the broader historical narrative of postcolonialism, in which former colonies (postcolonies, as Mbembe calls them) attempt to refashion their own societies and integrate into the global economic, political, and social order.  

The reality of global terrorism, however, adds another layer to understanding social change in postcolonies, and complicates the already complicated struggles of postcoloniality by adding the gravitas of the fundamental need for security. The post-9/11 period witnessed the re-evaluation of Islamic charities in terms of their ties – real or imagined – to violent extremists. After 9/11, Islamic charities experienced a crisis of legitimacy that has yet to be resolved fully.

Scholarship on Islamic charities after 9/11 both reflects and analyzes the paradigm of security as the primary approach for evaluating Islamic charities. From within the security paradigm, scholars attempt to understand Islamic charitable

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32 Ibid. 31.
33 Ibid. 7.
organizations in terms of their legitimacy, by which is meant their capacity to contain
terrorism. The security paradigm is linked to a notion of global order that places great
value on the secular organization of institutions and societies. This paradigm raises new
analytical questions regarding global integration, often contrasting Islamic charities with
international organizations and giving normative weight to the latter in shaping the terms
of integration.\textsuperscript{35} The security paradigm also compels the “regulation of the charitable
sector” as a means of bringing Islamic charities into the secular international order.\textsuperscript{36}

Studies of Islamic charities can also help evaluate the security paradigm itself,
broadening what are already wide debates about how the current global order fosters or
limits humanitarianism as an international force for the coordination of global affairs.\textsuperscript{37}
Such evaluations assert that humanitarian relief – the provision of resources to those
distressed by human or natural disasters – is inherently political, and the participation of
Islamic charities in international aid efforts opens up the possibility of an inclusive global
order. Scholars Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan note that many Islamic aid organizations
are still working out how best to navigate the tension between adapting to international
secular principles that posit “giving to all without discrimination” as the normative value
of humanitarianism, and the desire to “reinject religious values” into their relief work.\textsuperscript{38}
This tension can also be understood as one between the claims of secular universalism
and the value of “cultural proximity” – the ability of agencies to reach people more

\textsuperscript{35} James Shaw Hamilton, “Recognizing the Ummah in Humanitarianism: International Regulation
of Islamic Charities,” \textit{Understanding Islamic Charities}, eds. Jon B. Alterman and Karin von
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Jonathan Benthall and Jerome Bellion-Jourdan. \textit{The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.156.
effectively based on the expectation of familiarity and commonality that arises from shared cultural values.\textsuperscript{39} This raises the question as to the possibilities of the universal as a truly cross-cultural and therefore international category, given that many Islamic charities operate through an “alternate universalism”:\textsuperscript{40} can the universal account for its own alternatives? Interestingly, Benthal and Bellion-Jourdan note that the limitations of universalism are, in fact, what constitutes the universal:

We must conclude by sounding a skeptical note about the validity of unqualified claims to universalism in the humanitarian field – whether they are grounded in secular principle or religious doctrine. Henry Dunant, founder of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Bernard Kouchner of Médecins San Frontières, Hany El Banna of Islamic Relief – all in turn ran up against obstacles to universalism. The ICRC saw itself perceived as a Crusader organization by the Ottoman soldiers; MSF was confronted by Afghan men who would not allow male French doctors to look after Afghan women; Islamic Relief has had to deal with Albanian Muslims who had no wish to go to the mosque rather than the discotheque.\textsuperscript{41}

Islamic charities, like all charities, provide relief based on the universal value of expressing humanity through helping others. However, all of these efforts, Islamic and secular, are subject to the incomplete realization of universal ideals that characterize humanitarian endeavors.

Analyzing scholarship on Islamic charities in the post-9/11 period emphasizes several important factors regarding religion and poverty in the contemporary world. First, the desire to have broader human interaction and connection beyond nation-states and particular religious traditions is pervasive across many different countries and cultures. This desire thus keeps people involved in efforts to shape the global order, and is a cross-

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.155.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.156.
cultural instance of what Bourdieu calls an “illusio,” the sense of investment, interest, and involvement in the game of life. Second, the threat of terrorism and the desire for security are also equally pervasive, and also cut across the borders of countries and cultures. This desire, too, is being worked out in very experimental ways in the contingent context of multiple political and social formations, occasionally subjecting Islamic charities to the governmentality of security regimes. Third, the charitable impulse has an “inescapable political dimension” expressed in relationships of power between people, between states and citizens, and between countries and cultures. Finally, because charity involves “the constant risk of imposing a conception of the good in the presumed interests of distressed and vulnerable people,” it is, like many human encounters, fraught with moral hazard.

Poverty and charity are still emerging topics within the study of Islam, with close to a dozen monographs summarizing the results of scholarly inquiry so far. By and large, this scholarship has focused on the Middle East, the historical heartland of Islam. In the contemporary world, however, most Muslims live in Asia and the topics of poverty and charity remain woefully underexamined in this culturally diverse geographical context. There is a pronounced need to include the full diversity of Muslim societies in the study of poverty and charity, given that, in the world today, Islam is preeminently a pan-Asian religion. Multiple geographical foci can further enrich the understanding of poverty as an enduring concern of Muslim life. Holger Weiss’ investigation of charity and poverty in West African Muslim societies makes a valuable contribution to the broader study of

43 Benthall 153
44 Ibid. 156.
Islam, using ethnographic methods to combine an under-studied topic with a geographical focus on a peripheral region. His work chronicles the dynamism of local Muslim discourse by tracking scholarly and public debates about the extent to which zakat, as a ritual charitable donation that purifies wealth, can be adequately adapted to the modern project of poverty alleviation.45

Weiss’ projects highlight the tension between religious charity and the modern mandate to alter the circumstances of the poor. Zakat stands as a primary religious obligation of Muslims. As such, it has remained, and will likely continue to remain, as an essential point of entry through which Muslims confront the complexity of poverty. Interpreted over centuries by religious scholars as a formal matter of worship, zakat exists ultimately as a gesture before God. Yet Islamic scholars note both the adaptability of the institution of zakat, and the profound desire to ease the suffering and distress of others, which itself is understood as an expression of Islamic moral principles. Rather than seeing religion as a constraint upon possible efforts of poverty alleviation in Muslim societies, zakat, by virtue of its structuring of Islamic piety, functions as an irrevocable anchoring of attention on poverty and distress, integrating concern with suffering and vulnerability into the religious imagination. Zakat, along with complementary Islamic institutions such as voluntary giving and pious foundations, tethers Islamic action on poverty without necessarily limiting it.

The Problematization of Poverty in Modernity

Poverty was recognized as a global problem in the post-World War II period, the same period in which the study of religion as an interdisciplinary field blossomed. After the war, one of the early changes that marked the “restructuring of global culture and political economy” was “the ‘discovery’ of mass poverty in Asia, African, and Latin America.”46 This discovery was predicated on new methods of data collection begun by the recently formed World Bank. By initiating comparative statistical studies in the 1940s, the bank established the measure of annual per capita income to demonstrate the vast economic differences between people living in developed countries and those living in what could then be seen as undeveloped countries.

Institutions of global governance such as the United Nations thus began to problematize chronic poverty. “The United Nations estimated that per capita income in the United States was $1,453 in 1949, whereas in Indonesia it barely reached $25. This led to the realization that something had to be done before the levels of instability in the world as a whole became intolerable. The destinies of the rich and the poor parts of the world were seen to be closely linked.”47 Poverty produced in this discourse not just a humanitarian concern for the challenges poor people face, but a threat to stability across the globe. What linked poor and rich together was the desire to contain this threat of destabilization. Through the emerging understandings of poverty, supported by the scientific evidence of statistical data, the majority of the world’s population was

47 Escobar 22.
“transformed into poor subjects.” The same constellations of institutions that produced the problematization of poverty also, not surprisingly, offered a solution. “If the problem was one of insufficient poverty, the solution was clearly economic growth.” Thus the ‘war on poverty’ became one of the hallmark expressions of newly configured global power that sought to advance national economies in an ever-expanding process of economic growth.

The modernization of poverty marked a historical turning point. Both Wolfgang Sachs and Majid Rahnema maintain that prior to this period, poverty was understood in distinctly emic and etic ways. From the perspective of colonial regimes (which, it must be remembered, controlled most of the world’s Muslim societies), poverty was taken as evidence of the intrinsic incapacity of ‘natives’ to embrace a scientific episteme and technologies of progress. Yet within everyday lifeworlds of many Asian, African, Latin American, and Native American societies, local practices “had developed ways of defining and treating poverty that accommodated visions of community, frugality, and sufficiency. Whatever these traditional ways might have been, and without idealizing them, it is true that massive poverty in the modern sense appeared only when the spread of the market economy broke down community ties and deprived millions of people from

48 Escobar 24.
49 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
[sic] access to land, water, and other resources. With the consolidation of capitalism, systematic pauperization became inevitable.”

The recognition of the poor as a modern social problem precipitated “the management of poverty.” After this turning point, responses to poverty were defined through the technique of intervention. “Education, health, hygiene, morality, employment, the good habits of association, savings, [and] child rearing,” constituted specific areas of intervention that could manage poverty. Thus the problematization of poverty generated a “panoply” of interventions that helped to mark out the domain of ‘the social’ in modernity. Modern understandings of sociality became constituted in part through the apprehension of problems and threats: not just poverty, but health, education, underemployment, inequality, integration and urban conditions.

The trajectory of the modernization of poverty coincides with the development of religious studies in the post-WWII period. Poverty has a paradoxical place in the history of religion, since religious discourses have consistently produced powerful ethical imperatives for the practical redress of poverty, and at the same time religious actors have often struggled to motivate others to take seriously the collective stakes involved in transforming the daily challenges of those living in poverty. Given the Euro-American provenance of the field of religious studies, many scholars produce knowledge about religion from within societies in which poverty is seen as a social problem that must be overcome. Poverty is something to be ‘confronted,’ ‘challenged,’ ‘tackled,’ and ‘fought.’

52 Escobar 22.
53 Escobar 23.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
Fighting poverty is conceptualized as effort, a form of (social) work largely within the provenance of the state, aided by local communities, public organizations, and occasionally congregations. Within the modern period, the construction of religion as a domain contrasting to the public domain (of the state) depicts poverty as a problem that can be interpreted religiously but acted upon socially. Because the problematization of poverty in modernity relegates the struggle against poverty to the realm of the social, scholarly inquiry about poverty within religious studies is still discerning the analytical categories that are useful in understanding the mutual complexity of poverty and religion, which crosses the boundaries of public and private.\(^56\)

This dissertation falls within the purview of two subfields of Islamic studies, the study of Islam in South Asia, and the study of women and gender in Islam. In both of these subfields, poverty has yet to become a robust topos of inquiry – a lacuna all the more prominent given that poverty is a gendered phenomenon, and the geographical area of South Asia is home to large populations of Muslims living in chronic poverty. These are both substantial subfields within the study of Islam, and my aim here is focused on drawing out the unique contributions in each field that build the foundation for the analysis of this study.

\(^{56}\) Talal Asad analyzes the split between public and private that undergirds the understanding of religion in modernity in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
The Historical Context of Islam in South Asia

The geographical region of South Asia has been both historically and culturally significant for understanding the diverse trajectories that have formed Muslim societies. Beginning with the formation of Islamicate states in the medieval period and continuing through to the contemporary postcolonial period, South Asian Islam has taken shape within a dynamic context of cultural and religious diversity. Islam in South Asia is best understood in the context of the plurality of religious cultures, influenced by and influencing the various practices that make the region culturally distinct.

Four aspects of South Asian Islam bear on this study. The first and primary aspect is the multicultural South Asian context that has shaped Indo-Islamic culture. Muslims have historically been a minority among a Hindu majority, and Indian Islamic traditions have taken distinct forms that reflect multiple and hybrid cultural influences. Indo-Muslim culture is both recognizably Islamic and distinctly South Asian. Second, the devotional culture, which has sustained the possibility of pluralist religious practices, produces consistently permeable boundaries between different religious groups in South Asia. This shared devotional tradition becomes a defining feature of Islam in India, both in terms of those Muslim practices that sustain it and those which fall outside of it. The pluralism of devotional life, however, contrasts sharply and deeply with ideologies and episodes of ‘communalism’ – a South Asian term describing antagonism, tension, discrimination, and violence between people of different Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian religious communities. This third aspect of South Asian history and society becomes especially important for understanding the effects of religious nationalism and extremism in contemporary India. The final aspect of South Asian Islam is the history of
reform movements that have attempted to articulate ways of being Muslim in the context of modern India. The efforts of these groups shape a public space of debate about the ways in which Islamic traditions can best be followed and expressed within the context of South Asian social and political structures. These four aspects of Islam in India provide the historical background for the analysis of Muslim anti-poverty projects in this study.

South Asian culture reflects the diverse practices and historical traditions that have influenced the region. With the establishment of Islamicate empires during the medieval period, Muslims ruled as a minority over “culturally plural polities” that included migrants of different ethnicities as well as a vastly diverse local population.\(^{57}\) For centuries, Muslim rulers – both Sunnis and Shi’a, both Mughals and those reigning over local principalities – patronized culturally productive courts that became sites of connection between multiple religious and social traditions.\(^{58}\) They endorsed the production of poetry, architecture, art, music, and religious discourse that combined diverse influences into new forms that characterized the culture of the court.\(^{59}\) Sanskrit texts were translated in Persian, the lingua franca of the Subcontinent that was only displaced late in colonial rule, as were Islamic legal and philosophical texts from Arabic. The Mughal empire established diplomatic ties across Asia, including with the Ottoman, Acehnese, and Iranian dynasties, from whom the quintessentially Indo-Islamic art form of miniature painting was adopted. When questioned about the traditionally Islamic prohibition of figural representation, the Mughal emperor Akbar replied: “It appears to


\(^{59}\) Metcalf 14.
me as if a painter had a quite peculiar means of recognizing God: for a painter in
sketching anything that has life, and in devising its limbs, one after another, must come to
feel that he cannot bestow individuality upon his work, and is thus forced to think of God,
the giver of life, and will thus increase in knowledge.”

Muslim rule thus created spaces for linguistic translation and cultural synthesis, while at the same time encouraging the parallel formation of culturally distinct traditions. Metcalf notes, for example, that Muslim rulers continually patronized non-Muslim places of worship, even as they leveled the temples of rebellious local princes.

As rulers from a religious minority, Muslims were interested in establishing relationships with their subjects that enhanced social and political stability. Some Muslim rulers such as Akbar and his son Jahangir not only granted freedom of religion as a practical public policy, but also affirmed “that all religious traditions contained elements of value.” They both sustained the practice of public religious debates, allowing religious specialists from across the empire and around the world to hold open philosophical conversations at court. Thus a supra-sectarian understanding of the value of religion became a cultural ideal of medieval Muslim India. Writing in the early years of the seventeenth century, Jahangir remembered his father’s reign as a time when such ideals guided public life:

Followers of various religions had a place in the broad scope of his peerless empire – unlike other countries of the world like Iran, where there is room for only Shi’ites….Just as all groups and the practitioners of all religions have a place within the spacious circle of God’s mercy, in accordance with the dictum that a shadow must follow its source, in my

60 Schimmel 84.
61 Metcalf 15.
62 Ibid.
father’s realm, which ended at the salty sea, there was room for practitioners of various sects and beliefs, both true and imperfect, and strife and altercation were not allowed. Sunni and Shi’ite worshipped in one mosque and Frank and Jew in one congregation.63

To be clear, such accounts romanticize what were often contentious philosophical and political matters. Yet the contestation of such ideals does not preclude their being included in the prevailing cultural ethos. Within the matrix of Indo-Muslim cultural legacies, one cultural strand makes space for the public affirmation that collective wellbeing overrides sectarian loyalties.

Indo-Muslim culture has not been transmitted across centuries unchanged, certainly, but some cultural forms and practices have proved remarkably resilient and enduring. Sufism constitutes one such case, and has profoundly influenced the Subcontinent. This is in large measure because the tradition posits that Sufi guides (known in the vernacular as a pir, or a shaykh) as being able to continually bestow blessings (baraka) upon those who seek their help, even after death.64 The graves of both prominent teachers of Sufi lineages and local Sufis known for their powerful blessings or miracles are scattered throughout the Subcontinent, made into shrines (dargahs) that are open to all people of all religious affiliations.65 The accessibility of dargahs comes from the priority of direct religious experience in Sufi thought, with its great “emphasis on the possibility of there being a lived and

63 Jahangirnama, cited in Metcalf 15.
64 Schimmel 137.
experienced relationship between the believer and God.” Because the power of the saint continues to reach people through the material form of the shrine, anyone who visits the shrine is, in theory, the recipient of the blessings of the saint.

The complex expression of Sufism in South Asia involves also several significant modalities of religious performance. First is the act of devotion, as individuals put themselves in a state of being marked by the desire to experience the divine. This modality is not limited to Islam, but is part of the wider religious culture of South Asia. Second, aspects of Sufi traditions intersect with polyvocal religious expressions that move between and through the religious vocabularies of different traditions. For example, figures such as the popular Sai Baba of Shirdi (d.1918) spoke to his Muslim and Hindu followers about both Islamic and Hindu teachings. Such figures cannot be understood solely in terms of Sufism, but the pervasive presence of Sufi saints contributes to cultural models that make religious polyvocality intelligible. Finally, the corpus of vernacular poetry and complementary musical genres associated with Sufism connects aesthetic performance with local linguistic context, and thus becomes part of the historical creativity of diverse cultural imaginaries across the region. Works of mystical poetry in regional languages fell into everyday life by virtue of their easy integration with oral culture, so they were chanted, sung, recited, and remembered both in special sacred spaces and in the context of domestic life, such as the celebration of the birth of child.

These modalities of religious performance traverse distinctions of language, literacy, status, gender, and ethnicity with the result that traditions of Sufism in the

Subcontinent became partly defined by their social accessibility. The diversity of people who participate in Sufi practices has led to the characterization of Sufism as ‘folk Islam,’ which is then constructed as a modality of religion uniquely consonant with the lives of the marginalized, offering “the poor and the suffering some spiritual consolation which enriches their lives in a mysterious way.”87 This view of Sufi practices in South Asia constructs mysticism and poverty as engaged in a relationship of mutuality: those who lack in the material realm receive unique compensation from the spiritual realm. Sufi traditions are not, in fact, circumscribed by class identity, yet the understanding of Sufism as more open to people who are poor or suffering reflects the lack of religious prerequisites for participation and devotional action.68 Schimmel explains this popular appeal of Sufism:

Mystics wanted only to teach love of God and love of the Prophet, without resorting to the whole apparatus of theological definitions or hairsplitting legalism; more importantly, they wanted to convey these ideas not only to the elite…rather, they wanted to address the masses, who were neither conversant with the Arabic language of theology nor the Persian of the literati. Therefore they used the indigenous languages and the poetical forms that were known in the countryside, and, more specifically, among the women.69

By offering people access to human examples of holiness, by marking material spaces of blessings, and by engaging people through the most intimate languages and symbols, Sufi traditions emphasize the possibility of religious experience regardless of social location, status, and sectarian identity.

67 Schimmel 139.
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69 Ibid.
As in many other Muslim societies around the globe, India witnessed the emergence of a variety of reform movements in the nineteenth century. These movements involved several different groups that actively sought “to bring Muslim thought and practice closer to Islamic doctrinal prescriptions,” several of which are still active and deeply influential across South Asia today. Reformist movements are often contrasted to Sufism, and while it is not necessary to oversimplify their differences, it is important to note that groups that worked to reform religious and social practices did so by “intervening in the public sphere,” and thus distinguished themselves from Sufi groups primarily through their participation in public debates about religion. In their projects of reform, these movements varied in terms of the issues they focused on, the definitions of tradition they believed needed to be revived, their critiques of regional religious practice, and their ability to collaborate with each other. Some like the Deobandis emphasized “raising the status of the Qur’an and hadith,” while others focused on improving religious practice, or “establishing the ways of the Prophet.” What these different reformist groups had in common were the strategies through which they sought to implement religious ideals in society. They all took advantage of recent developments in print technology to disseminate their ideas, addressed the question of education for Muslims, and initiated public associations to structure

70 Marsden xiii.
72 Reetz provides an overview of reformist groups and the religious commitments that distinguished them, 52-81.
their projects.\textsuperscript{73} Taken together, these reformist groups marked a distinct historical development as their efforts to “discourage the autonomy of public discourse from religious authority” shaped popular consciousness of the public sphere as a domain for contesting visions of religious expression.\textsuperscript{74}

Reform movements sought to regulate doctrinal understanding and enhance religious practice among Muslims in South Asia, yet their efforts were not limited to matters of interpretation or ritual. Particularly in the early part of the twentieth century, they also addressed pressing social issues facing Muslims, including the status of Islamic law, the participation of Muslims in a secular state, the appropriate structure of mass education, and the most effective means of improving social welfare. Reform movements publicly articulated programs of gender reformation. These gender reforms sought, in part, to enhance women’s legal rights, for example by shifting the requisite number of years that women whose husbands had abandoned them had to wait to have their marriages dissolved, to promote women’s education, and to clarify normative parameters regarding the comportment of pious women.\textsuperscript{75} While the social and gender reforms of different groups varied, they all used the public sphere to assert religious authority in determining normative religious, social, and gender ideals.

\textsuperscript{73} Reetz 48.
\textsuperscript{74} Reetz 24.
The final aspect of Islam in South Asia that bears on this ethnographic study is the context of interreligious relations. Muslims constitute India’s largest minority group, and any understanding of their history must take into account their relations with the Hindu population and other religious minorities. Throughout the Subcontinent, religious identity has been historically constructed as membership in a ‘community,’ which is seen as the fundamental unit from which Indian society emerges. Communalism is an ideologically formed antagonistic view of other religious traditions, a “politcized religious chauvinism.”76 It is the South Asian idiom for what is known in other contexts as sectarianism.

The debates about the history of communal identity have, at their root, different interpretations of how such identities have been consolidated through public acts of representation and violence. One critical juncture in chronicling the formation of communal religious identity occurred in the colonial period. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the British introduced decennial census taking in which all Indians were compelled to identify themselves as belonging to a single religious community.77 The colonial construction of knowledge about religion as a fundamentally communal phenomenon enabled the regime to create a “communalist” narrative to legitimize policy and explain violence.78 In light of the formation of communal identities in the colonial period, some see religious

violence in postcolonial India “as resulting from a monolithic modernizing state” which extends religious subject formation along colonial lines.\textsuperscript{79} Others look at precolonial state formations, noting that there is a history of state involvement in “the construction of religious community” seen in both Muslim and Hindu states in South Asia.\textsuperscript{80} While this question of violence as a precolonial continuity or a postcolonial change is open to interpretation, what animates this debate is the desire to trace patterns of antagonism and violence and locate their source in some external factor beyond ‘primordial’ impulses to subdue those who are different.

Modern communalism is often ‘read’ through incidents of violence, through the analysis of ideological links between episodic eruptions of riots across time and across territory. Two dramatic events of violence highlight the intersection of communalism and nationalism, demonstrating the profoundly contested nature of both the state and religion in India. In 1992, a combination of Hindu-nationalist groups led a campaign to destroy a medieval mosque that had been built over an even older temple. The destruction of the Babri Masjid at the hands of Hindus triggered intense violence across several major Indian cities that killed more than 2000 people, and even affected the neighboring Muslim-majority countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh. A decade later, in 2002, another incident in the state of Gujarat enflamed into a “pogrom” of violence that displaced more than 140,000 people and killed approximately 2000 people, most of whom were

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{79} Peter Van der Veer, \textit{Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 33.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
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Muslim. Communal violence affects all Indians, and these two incidents stand out in the recent history of violence as particularly painful events. For many Muslims, these incidents have intensified the sense of struggling to combat their vulnerability and alienation. While such violence is not new, it sharpens questions about the ability of the state to protect its citizens, and about the grounds on which people can continue living together as religiously-different neighbors after they have been each other’s victims, perpetrators, and by-standers. Communalism shapes the everyday context of religious interaction in India, not least of all through the attempts to counteract it.

The histories of multiculturalism, Sufism, reformism, and communalism do not explain Islam in India today, but these form trajectories that map out some of the major forces shaping the lived context of Muslims. These are the contextual legacies through which Muslims in Indian shape their day-to-day realities.

**Suffering, Wellbeing, and Gender in Islam**

In postcolonial Muslim societies, the contestation of gender discloses processes of changing religious ideals and formations of justice. Through such contestations, we see how ideals and performances of gender are bounded and made intelligible. This study understands gender as a dialectical engagement

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between two modalities of articulation: the normative/prescriptive and the reflective/descriptive. The domain of gender is partly constituted by normative ideals and ideologies that attempt to organize and communicate gender both internally and externally. It is also constituted in part by reflective expressions of gender as a lived experience that can be described so as to add to the broader archive of knowledge about human development. I maintain there is no “authoritative transcendental horizon” through which gender “can be identified and described” with finality. Rather, the social construction of gender produces gender as a domain for the simultaneous expression of human creativity and coherence. This simultaneity of creativity and coherence in gender is often taken as the embodiment of agency and structure although this can lead to a reification of the individual in relationship to society. Because I am interested in how people attempt to counter poverty, I investigate spaces that shape experiments in social change. The dialectical understanding of gender in terms of coherence and creativity more accurately describes the presentation of the collective stakes of confronting suffering. Understanding gender as a dynamic articulation allows us to investigate how particular formations of gender are held to be significant for collective selfhood and belonging.

Understanding gender within the dialectic of the normative claims of coherence and the creative reflection of experience usefully frames the contested nature of gender, and can therefore support inquiry into gender subordination and

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its corollary gender justice. The study of women and gender in Islam investigates
the construction of gender through the “production of religious meaning and
practice.”84 This study of Muslim antipoverty projects in India draws on scholarly
investigations of women and gender in Islam in order to chronicle the gendered
notions of selfhood and belonging presented to alleviate social suffering.

Women’s education as a vehicle for the social reform of Muslim societies, the
ethics of gender, feminist engagement with sacred texts, and the formation of
public arenas for the contestation of gender illustrate how the organization of
gender comes to be understood as crucial to wellbeing in society.

The status of women emerged as a key issue for the reformation of
Muslim societies in the modern period. Through the reformist projects of the
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the education of Muslim women was
seen as site for potential improvement of the broader society.85 The impetus for
encouraging women’s education was often to counter colonial images of Islam as
a ‘backward’ religious tradition, inevitably failing to achieve modernity by virtue
of the gender restrictions that limited women from fulfilling their human capacity.
Promoting women’s education would thus enable Muslim societies to rise to a
sufficient level of social development that could enhance their negotiation of
power at the national and global level.

84 Van der Veer 84.
85 Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Lila
Abu-Lughod, Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East (Princeton:
Reformists – both men and women – presented diverse, and sometimes divergent, visions of women’s education. For some modernists, the secular *and* religious education of women would redress women’s status while simultaneously generating the human capital and social ideals necessary for transforming Muslim societies to better compete with Europe and America. For those Muslims who sought to reform their societies through the application of traditional models of religious practice, educating women about Islamic tradition and practice would expand the moral resources of Muslim societies by deepening the possibilities for expressing piety within the domestic sphere.\(^\text{86}\) While reformers differed in terms of their cultural teleologies and their understanding of how Islam might best be brought to bear in shaping Muslim modernities, they sought to expand the opportunities for women to learn as an instrumental strategy for improving society.

The efforts to reform Muslim societies spurred the formation of new visions of Islamic social ethics that included women and gender in the moral imaginary. Social reform was not merely nor solely politically strategic. It also reconstructed religious understandings of what it means to be Muslim and to practice Islam in such a way as to make the moral significance of religious practice clearer.\(^\text{87}\) These efforts integrated the social with the ethical and construed society as the field for the embodiment of virtue. Linked with efforts to

\(^\text{86}\) Thanvi 50.

improve women’s status in religious practice and social participation, this opened
up new directions for including family relations and sexuality to ethical discourse.
In part, efforts of social change and reform necessitated the excavation of Islamic
ethical traditions that needed to be deconstructed and reconstructed in order to
support women’s full participation as moral beings in Muslim societies. Yet this
reformulation of Islamic social ethics also addressed the spheres of virtuous
action as it sought to encourage the formation of moral subjects, and thus
prompted debates about recognizing the ethical organization of the domestic life
and political participation of women.

Understandings of gender in Muslim societies in the contemporary period
change, in part, through the feminist interpretation of Islamic scripture and
tradition. By engaging with the authoritative sources of knowledge about Islam,
women are able to redress imbalances of religious authority and construct
alternative normative claims through the sources and methods recognized by the
broad collectivity of Muslims. It is important to realize that this is not just about
the formation of Islam as a discursive tradition: Qur’anic exegesis through
feminist hermeneutics attempts to make sacred power available to women and
men committed to notions of gender inclusivity and equality. Feminist
interpretation of Islamic texts allows for the continual renewal and expansion of

90 Amina Wadud, *Qur’an And Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) stands as the foundational work of modern feminist exegesis.
91 Asad 226.
the meaning of Islam. It opens up the symbolic Islamic order in such a way as to remind practitioners of the ultimately transcendent goals posited by Islam.

Finally, scholarship on women and gender in Islam has demonstrated the value of the public sphere as a domain for the continual reformation of religious gender ideals. The emergence of women’s organizations throughout the twentieth century made use of public arenas as a platform for reflection and action. Public associations and organizations enabled women to put forth collective statements about their joint interests. The public sphere became a space to synthesize collectively Muslim women’s experiences and reflections on domestic life, social relations, nationalist projects, aesthetic practices, and political possibilities.92 The public sphere differs across Muslim societies, as it has across time, and in some contexts, the participation of women in public life is still quite constrained.93 Yet the increasing presence and activity of women in public life has disaggregated the political construction of Muslim communities as unitary and, implicitly, male-defined. From a comparative perspective, increasing globalization has made women more aware of the everyday life conditions of other women in other societies, and thus has encouraged women everywhere to advocate for their own participation in public decision-making.

The archive of knowledge about how gender and Islam mutually inform one another is still being filled out. Because gender stands as a field of

experimentation for human creativity and social coherence, gender is never complete or finished. Efforts to promote women’s learning and education, the integration of gender into the moral imaginaries of Islam, feminist exegesis of sacred texts, and the participation of women in public decision-making are four strategies of gender formation that are at the same time strategies to enhance social wellbeing. The case studies analyzed in this study of Muslim antipoverty projects reflect these strategic trajectories of gender formation in their efforts. They demonstrate that when contextualized by poverty, the ability to contest gender becomes a critical resource to contain suffering and promote wellbeing.

**Ethnography of Muslim Poverty Alleviation**

This study is organized around the analysis of three Muslim antipoverty projects in the city of Hyderabad. Each of these public projects stands an a case study for understanding how Muslims have shaped new forms of social engagement in order to redress the suffering of those whose lives are conditioned by deprivation and lack. I use the term ‘project’ to describe these organizations for they are experimental attempts to transform the social production of inequality. All three of the case studies here are also local efforts, so the term ‘project’ also contrasts with the broader scale and claims of a social movement. The description of social project further contrasts with the phenomenon of political parties, for none of these projects intend to enter into representative
even as they actively participate in the “space for debate about the public good” in democratic India.  

The case studies discussed here were the primary foci of my field research in Hyderabad. For eighteen months during 2004-2006, and then again for a month in 2008, I conducted participant-observations, structured interviews, and unstructured interviews with people involved with these projects. As part of my fieldwork, I volunteered with all three of the projects using what skills I had to contribute to their efforts so that I might better understand them. In the course of my fieldwork, I taught conversational English classes to staff, edited grant proposals and reports, and participated in community workshops. I also found myself passing on skills I had long taken for granted as I coached young women who wanted to learn how to ride a bicycle or drive a scooter. I spent time with women who were part of a handicraft production program, talking and cutting patterns from cloth to be tailored or embroidered. Both my grandmother and my mother are accomplished seamstresses who for a time generated supplemental income by sewing, and I am grateful that they passed on this skill, not knowing I would use it many years later and many miles away. They trusted it was a useful life skill and they were right. I also have some experience in community capacity-building for conflict resolution, and at times when I was invited to discuss program activities over a cup of chai, I shared what knowledge I have of that field. I tried, in short, to be useful. I do not know to what extent I succeeded in

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that, but it was important to the people involved in these projects that I tried to do so: whatever fuzzy expectations I had about listening and observing while doing field work were fairly quickly and pretty clearly pushed aside by the explicitly stated expectation that I needed to add something of value. I gratefully did what little I could to fulfill this request, which seemed modest enough given the singular learning opportunity I was granted in studying these projects.

The three Muslim social projects described in the following chapters are committed to improving the lives of those who are struggling with the circumstances of poverty. My analysis of these projects is a qualitative one as I am primarily interested in understanding how such efforts relate to Islamic tradition writ broadly. This does not mean that the quantitative effects of these projects – the measurable outcomes through which their efficacy can be evaluated – are unimportant. Such evaluations do however require specific analytical tools and are best taken up by those in other fields such as economics. Historian Bronislaw Geremek states that “it is not possible to understand poverty outside of its social context and without taking account of society’s attitudes towards the underprivileged,” and this study takes seriously the context of poverty in Muslim societies and attempts to show how Islamic ideals are brought to bear on social suffering.\(^95\)

Muslim antipoverty projects address the social dimension of poverty. Akhil Gupta’s recent study, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and...

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*Poverty in India,* examines poverty as violence that “is built into the structure of power.” Gupta locates this structural violence in the state, which produces arbitrariness of care “by the very mechanisms that are meant to ameliorate social suffering.” Drawing on Herzfeld’s notion of ‘the social production of indifference,’ Gupta argues that the state, through its bureaucratic machinations, “perpetuates a social order” in which “extreme suffering is not only tolerated, but also taken as normal” to the extent that it becomes “part of the landscape.” Gupta sees this structural violence as paradoxical given the inclusion of the poor “in projects of national sovereignty.” The question of whether or not Muslims and women are included in national projects of sovereignty is, I would argue, still open to interpretation. Certainly one can take the Sachar Committee report as an admission of the state of its ongoing exclusion of Muslims.

The projects described here do not focus on the state but on the construction of social spaces and experimental efforts by Muslims who want to transform poverty. In so doing, they challenge the social production of indifference by creating communities of care. These projects de-normalize poverty and refuse to sanction what Weber called ‘social closure,’ which in its

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97 Ibid.
98 Ibid. 24.
99 Ibid. 21,15.
100 Ibid. 6.
most extreme form produces zones of human sacrifice.\textsuperscript{101} They operate in the domain of the social based on the understanding that suffering is experienced as a rupturing that can be countered through the sense of belonging. Given that the definition of the state is not constant, and practices of religious formation cannot be “reduced to the state,” these projects open up the possibility that social spaces to contain suffering by producing care can also possibly produce citizens that make claims for restructuring the state.\textsuperscript{102}

In contrast to Gupta’s emphasis on the state, this study focuses on the local scale of religion and society. Through my analysis of three case studies, I argue that poverty localizes Islam. The creation of social projects to counter poverty is situated in the immediate context of everyday lifeworlds on a local scale. Rather than understanding ‘local Islam’ in contrast to ‘global Islam’ as two given categories, I explore here how “locality and community… are formed and lived.”\textsuperscript{103} Poverty, I argue, is a modality of localization of religion, and the local in this sense is better understood in terms of the horizon of the possibility of suffering and not merely against the greater scale of the global. Locality frames social relations, not only by closure but also through boundedness, and this bounded quality of the local marks the efforts of people who are trying to change

\textsuperscript{102} Van der Veer 30. For discussion of how Muslims make claims upon the state to support collective welfare, see Robert Hefner \textit{Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and for analysis of the limitations of state projects to protect human wellbeing, see James C. Scott, \textit{Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).
social relations. The local here is understood as the field of struggle. Rather than understanding the struggle against poverty as the individual effort “to realize our objective and ourselves…in relation to rivals and competitors,” Muslim antipoverty projects studied here shape this struggle in collective terms.\textsuperscript{104} They construct communities of care by fostering particular relations of belonging in the hopes of expanding “support networks outward in space and upward in the social hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{105} The communities of care created in Muslim antipoverty projects include people who are not Muslim, they include both women and men, and they include families as well as imagined moral communities.

Poverty is an enduring social problem that challenges people and communities. The three case studies considered here are public social projects that are also spaces for the elaboration of Islam. These projects could, in theory, operate outside of any religious engagement whatsoever, as do many development and social welfare organizations. Yet their efforts to counter poverty engage Islamic traditions, and by doing so, claim religion as relevant to redressing social suffering. They also implicitly mark out the religious significance of the social domain: rather than being the domain of the problematic, the social becomes the domain of creative experiments for wellbeing. In each of chapters 2, 3, and 4, a separate case study of a particular Muslim antipoverty project is analyzed, highlighting the unique elaborations of Islam involved in their day-to-day work. The final concluding chapter analyzes their invocations of religion comparatively.

\textsuperscript{104} Unni Wikan, \textit{Life Among the Poor in Cairo} (New York: Tavistock, 1980) 123.
\textsuperscript{105} Horden and Smith 45.
in order to show the unique intersections of religion, gender, and poverty in social projects. Taken together, these three case studies demonstrate that there is not one monolithic Islamic approach to the question of poverty. Rather Muslims draw on particular and contextual understandings of Islam to shape collective approaches to ‘helping the poor’ in ways that affirm, protect, and advance their religious interpretations at the same time that they respond to social suffering. It is not a single ethical code that organizes these projects, but particular interpretations of Islam, poverty, and gender which cluster together, and shape practical interventions, conceptualizations of social development, religious contestations, and understandings of human wellbeing.
Chapter 2

Expanding Charity: The Zakat Trust

As one of the five ‘pillars’, zakat stands as a primary religious obligation in doctrinal formulations of Islam. Zakat is an annual ritual donation of charity, most often calculated as 2.5% of particular kinds of wealth that a person has possessed for more than a year.\(^{106}\) Giving a portion of one’s personal wealth as zakat constitutes significant moral action that brings about multiple religious, material, and social effects. In theological terms, charity constitutes pious ethical action, an unambiguous gesture of doing what is right and has been commanded by God. As a ritual practice, zakat expresses the piety of the giver, and marks the donor as a righteous person. Further, the act of giving zakat purifies the donor’s wealth and property, thereby blessing material prosperity.\(^{107}\) In the social realm, the giving and receiving of zakat binds people to each other, reminding them that human wellbeing is ultimately linked, collective, and sustained through mutual support and recognition. These multiple effects of zakat work together, simultaneously, such that the spiritual is linked to the material in both the personal and interpersonal dimensions of life.

This chapter examines the local practice of zakat in Hyderabad through a case study of the Zakat Trust, a contemporary poverty alleviation project that re-shapes charity

\(^{106}\) Many online zakat calculators use this percentage as a contemporary conversion of the minimal amounts given in the traditional sources.

as social intervention in the gendered structures of poverty. The chapter begins with an overview of the practice of the zakat, and then moves on to examining contextual factors that affect the structure of zakat in order to analyze zakat in terms of gender relations. The description then addresses the unique formulation of charity in the Zakat Trust, and the construction of ethical subjectivity through charitable gifts. Because charity instantiates a social relationship between donor and recipient, the analysis of the Trust looks at how their zakat practice re-configures local traditions of patronage. Through their efforts to change the structures of poverty by forming ethical subjects, I look at how the Trust presents zakat as an occasion of reflexivity and autonomy. The chapter closes by demonstrating that zakat functions as a practical theodicy in the face of extreme suffering.

**The Historical Practice of Zakat**

Although the collection and distribution of zakat has varied in different historical epochs and geographical regions of Islamic societies, the practice of zakat dates from Muhammad’s lifetime, and early sources establish zakat as a foundational Muslim practice. In the Qur’an, “the commandment to give zakat is so often joined with the commandment to offer prayer (salat) that zakat was later termed the ‘companion’ (karina) to prayer.”\(^{108}\) From the inception of Islam then, zakat becomes one of the fundamental actions and markers of Muslim piety. In addition to asserting the meritorious nature of giving zakat, the Qur’an defines the categories of persons

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\(^{108}\) Ibid.
considered to be deserving recipients: the poor, the indigent, agents who collect zakat, those whose hearts are won over, slaves, debtors, those in the path of God, and travelers.\textsuperscript{109} Because giving zakat is obligatory, it becomes linked in Qur’anic discourse with the integrity of personal faith and related concerns such intention, hypocrisy, and repentance. In addition to expressing faith, zakat also confirms social identity, as it becomes a prerequisite for membership in the Muslim community during the formative early years of Islam. Other sources of tradition, the hadith and sunna, explicate in detail how the obligation to give zakat should be fulfilled. The “kinds of property subject to zakat, the minimum quantity (nisāb) in each case, the rate of zakat, and the rule of a one-year holding period” are all addressed in hadith and form the basis of legal regulations regarding zakat.\textsuperscript{110} From the earliest sources of Islamic tradition then, zakat is established as a fundamental obligation for Muslims, conjoined with prayer as a primary expression of devotion, and organized in its collection and distribution by religious authorities.

By ritualizing the transfer of wealth, the obligation of giving zakat incorporates the reallocation of resources into the on-going formation of the Islamic tradition. In effect, zakat works within the logic of redistribution by establishing a vehicle to transfer resources from those who have excess to those who lack necessities. Ideally, zakat tightens the weave of the social fabric by repairing any fissures. Insofar as zakat is given to those who are vulnerable and in need – widows, orphans, and the destitute, among others – it functions as a strategy of communal protection and integration. In practical terms then, zakat works as a kind of social corrective, creating an obligation on those

\textsuperscript{109} Q 9:60.
\textsuperscript{110} “zakāt” Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition.
who are thriving to take care of the needs of those who are not. According to tradition, both of these parties are necessary to the practice of zakat and the ‘purification’ of material wealth. What could have been an exclusively social relationship, one constituted by material inequality and therefore subject to the risk of domination and dysfunction, becomes instead held within religious tradition as a relationship that has a sacred function in spreading the bounty of God’s grace.

Modern religious thinkers have elaborated on traditional understandings of zakat. They have identified it as a practice with enough symbolic power and social relevance to counteract a variety of societal challenges, from colonialism to the reconfiguration of Islamic societies in modernity. In the early period of Islamic history zakat was collected by agents appointed by rulers, yet from “about the year 498/1100, governmental collection of zakat across the Muslim world had become largely a thing of the past.”\textsuperscript{111} This means that for more recent periods of Islamic history, zakat has been distributed either directly by individuals or indirectly through intermediaries such as local imams, Sufi \textit{tariqat}, and charitable foundations.\textsuperscript{112}

This open and flexible institutional framework for zakat collection allows zakat to emerge as a site for the creative reconstruction of Islam in the contemporary period. In the twentieth century, we can see a “shift from regarding zakat primarily as an act of piety (an attitude that still persists in some circles) to the emphasis on zakat as the foundation of the Islamic social and economic system,” and it is this view that

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
“dominates its modern revival.”\textsuperscript{113} Early twentieth-century reformers like Egyptian Rashid Rida, for example, “urged that the class of ‘slaves’ might now include not only individual but societies ‘enslaved’ by colonialism and that the \textit{zakat} for the ‘path of God’ should go, not to a jihad waged with arms, but to one waged with the weapons of argument and persuasion in the interest of restoration of Islam.”\textsuperscript{114} This reinterpretation of zakat as a locus of social reform has also been taken up by prominent clerics writing in the latter part of the century, such as Yusuf Qaradawi. He posits that the correct practice of zakat will redistribute wealth among the Muslim community (\textit{ummah}) and thereby remedy a host of evils – from endemic poverty and corruption, to dependence on government subsidies from the West.\textsuperscript{115} Specific practical issues involved in poverty alleviation are not addressed; rather, this understanding of zakat is one part of the broader project of claiming that Islamic practices and institutions provide a sufficient foundation for shaping modern society.

As part of the project of modernizing social reform, the ritual of zakat emerges as a practice that affirms the vitality and viability of Islam, and also occasions a discourse about how best to live morally in a world complicated by damaging imbalances of power. When framed in this manner, zakat authenticates attempts at social change by framing them in terms of values and practices that can be seen as authentically ‘Islamic’. Zakat therefore enables responses to modern problems to carry the sanction of tradition.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Yusuf Qaradawi. \textit{Mushkilat al-faqr wa-kayfā ʿālajahā al-Islām} (Cairo : Maktabat Wahbah, 1975).
Within contemporary Islamic thought, discourse about zakat and social welfare articulates contested claims about the state, the role of religion in society, and the exercise of religious authority. The exploration of social welfare becomes linked to reflections on the nature of the state. For many scholars, “the poor economic and political performance of the postcolonial Muslim states has led to a rising critique by Muslim scholars among whom the concepts of an Islamic state, Islamic economics and zakat take a central position in their argumentation.”

This means that interpretations of zakat connect to questions of whether the state should be Islamic or secular, how best to institute some kind of order that can be called Islamic, and what the scope of such an order should be. At stake in these conversations is the belief that the action of collecting and distributing zakat confers religious authority, and marks a person or an organization as a custodian of Islam.

Contextual Issues of Contemporary Zakat: The State, Public Life, and Social Welfare

To understand how zakat figures in contemporary debates about Islam, it is helpful to look at three intersecting dimensions of society: the state, public life, and social welfare. In response to the collapse of empires and processes of decolonization, some Muslims throughout the twentieth century referred to the ideal of an Islamic state as a standard for critiquing existing governments, and as a vision for orienting current practices of governance. This ideal encompassed a range of proposed state formations,

116 Weiss, Social Welfare, p. 9
from a resuscitated caliphate to the formal recognition of Islam in the constitutions of postcolonial nations. Based on historical precedent, one aspect of the Islamisation of the state was the formal administration of zakat. To date, only a small number of Muslim majority countries have institutionalized compulsory zakat collection, namely Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, and Malaysia.\textsuperscript{117} Other Muslim majority countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan, have established quasi-governmental bodies that administer voluntary donations.\textsuperscript{118} In these instances of compulsory collection and voluntary donation, the administration of zakat follows a traditional Islamic conception of state power and stands as a responsibility of the ruler on behalf of the ruled.

In countries where Muslims are a minority, such as India or the United States, or where they are the majority yet maintain popular support for secular democratic governance, as is the case in Indonesia, zakat is given privately or collected through independent organizations – foundations, NGOs, mass social organizations, mosques, and Sufi orders. For Islamists who desire to “bring Islam into every aspect of human life, political, social, economic, and cultural,” the ability of the state to oversee zakat enhances its claims of religio-political legitimacy.\textsuperscript{119} Yet even for Muslims who believe that the state should be secular, zakat still stands as a practice through which to realize crucial religious commitments, including that of social justice.

\textsuperscript{117} “zakāt” Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
The question of zakat and state control leads into the second issue, religion in public life. For some Muslims, even the non-state institutions which collect zakat still represent a vital expression of Islam and a contribution of Muslim values to society, whether it be a Muslim-majority one or not. In other words, zakat both makes good Muslim subjects and represents them to others. So even though zakat is ‘private’ – meaning, it is not compelled by or administered through the state – it can still have public intentions, purposes, and effects. In his survey of zakat practices in sub-Saharan Africa, Holger Weiss argues “for an applied model to be implemented among Muslim societies… namely the establishment of an Islamic order within the Muslim community but without the Islamisation of the state.”

Weiss’ focus on the establishment of an Islamic order is, I maintain, a helpful frame through which to approach contemporary zakat practices, as it allows us to see how people claim public space by ordering collective life, which dimensions of human life are seen to be important in an Islamic order, and who is included therein.

From that point of departure, two questions then emerge: what constitutes an Islamic order, and how is the Muslim community understood? In this chapter’s case study, and throughout the broader dissertation, I demonstrate that notions of an Islamic order as that which brings about collective wellbeing are profoundly diverse and contested. Further, discourse about ‘the Muslim community’ references diverse fields of concern, ideas of responsibility, boundaries of belonging, and opinions about what constitutes justice. In practice, ‘the Muslim community’ is an ideal that is used to reference very distinct desires for collective life; it opens ways of talking about and

120 Weiss 36.
redressing exclusion, and supports experiments that attempt to make private sufferings publicly actionable. Zakat is an intrinsically interpersonal practice of charity and, in our case study here, this religious obligation becomes a vehicle for making ethical claims about Muslim community.

In addition to the state and public life, zakat intersects with the third interrelated and equally contested issue of social welfare. Because zakat helps the poor and the indigent, different practices of zakat reveal diverse understandings of social welfare and collective wellbeing. For Weiss, it is the institutional framework of zakat—the location of its administrative infrastructure, whether it is compulsory or voluntary, whether it is given to the state, an NGO, or a Sufi order, for example—that marks the diversity of its practices. This view emphasizes the collection of zakat while leaving open questions about its distribution. While not diminishing the importance of the institutional framework for collection, I would add that a consideration of zakat distribution is worthy of examination, for it is in distributing zakat that different notions of social welfare and wellbeing come into play in lived human relationships.

The Qur’anic categories of zakat recipients identify people who experience different hardships—different, if you will, sufferings: widows, women who unexpectedly must navigate life on their own without a husband; orphans, vulnerable children who lack the security of protection and guardianship; and those who are indigent, people whose lack of food and necessities puts their very survival in question. The choices made in identifying recipients, the methods of transfer, and the interactions (or lack thereof) between donors and recipients can tell us much about how suffering is understood and how wellbeing is defined and supported. Whether zakat is given to a man who is the head
of a poor family or whether it is given to a single mother; whether it is given to a person who is raising an orphaned child, or to an orphanage; whether it is given to someone who is identified as poor by a state census or by a local imam; whether it is given to someone who actively seeks assistance, or someone whose poverty is implicitly recognized by others; whether it is given as food or as money – all of these choices significantly shape prevailing notions of the suffering of poverty and assumptions about the people who should take action for its redress. There is no single, unifying answer to these choices, which means there is no unified Islamic notion of social welfare underlying zakat. Rather, what we see in the distribution of zakat is that people make highly contextual choices about how best to relieve the suffering of poverty and encourage wellbeing.

One further issue at stake in the distribution of zakat is the construction of gender. The Qur’an specifically mentions women in the categories of zakat recipients (widows are mentioned, while widowers are not) such that traditional sources recognize certain circumstances of poverty as gendered. Beyond Islamic sources, broad socio-economic data attest that the very category of ‘poor’ is a gendered one: wherever there is poverty, the poorest of the poor are women.\footnote{Martha Nussbaum, \textit{Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 6.} This is not to say that men are not also poor, or do not suffer from material deprivation; it is rather to recognize that poverty and gender inequality intersect in such a way as to disadvantage doubly poor women.

If zakat functions to repair fissures and build social ties of obligation, what does the ideal of being obliged to care for others mean in terms of gender? If, for example, a
Sufi shaykh gathers zakat from local community members to build a hospital,\textsuperscript{122} does that hospital support pre- and post-natal care? Does it recognize any specific needs of female patients? If there is a school built with local zakat funds, are girls enrolled there? If zakat is given to a poor family, do girl children within that family benefit as much as or less than boy children? If zakat funds support the day-to-day operations of an orphanage, how are the children in that orphanage gendered – are girl orphans presented with the option of wearing a headscarf or is it required? If zakat goes to poor families, are those family units identified through a census that only counts family units headed by a man? If zakat is given privately, personally, from one individual to another, do such transactions more often happen between people of the same gender – zakat being given by a man to a man, or by a woman to a woman? What are the circumstances surrounding instances of cross-gender zakat donation? Much of the contemporary literature on zakat overlooks gender, yet these kinds of questions become relevant insofar as zakat, as Weiss notes, becomes part of establishing an Islamic order in Muslim communities, and gender practices are often seen to authorize the signification of a social order as ‘Islamic.’\textsuperscript{123} If both gender and social welfare practices characterize Islamic sociality, then exploring how they intersect allows us to better understand the multiple dimensions of wellbeing that Muslim communities strive to support.

As a religious ritual that is also an inherently interpersonal social practice, zakat becomes a significant mediation of formations of collective life such as the state, public


\textsuperscript{123} Leila Ahmed notes that Islamist positions regarding women “trap the issue of women with the struggle over culture,” linking “the reaffirmation of indigenous customs relating to women” to political agendas. \textit{Women and Gender in Islam} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 236.
life, social welfare, and gender. While Muslim thinkers frame zakat in terms of political critique, many Muslims still approach it in terms of an everyday ritual, and for them it remains an informal practice. According to popular religious understanding, zakat should be given first to those in one’s family, then to those in one’s locality, and then to those in one’s community. Obligation nests, as it were, in coincentric circles, beginning with the proximity of the family and extending outward into the society. Many Muslims distribute their zakat to several people, giving portions to different family members and neighbors.

Because of the latitude people have in deciding how to give their zakat, it is also sought by a wide variety of people to fulfill very diverse needs, some of which are more personal while others are more public. Often, people will seek zakat funds at a mosque, after Friday prayers, either individually or as part of a broader collective effort. After the tsunami in December 2004 devastated Southeast Asia, for instance, many people sought out donations for victims at local mosques. In places marked by high rates of poverty and weak infrastructure, people starting schools in Muslim communities – both public elementary schools and madrasas – may solicit zakat funds. Given the various channels for collection and distribution, zakat donors have the latitude to choose the mechanism and direction for their charitable donations. Because Muslims across different epochs, cultures, and geographies have found ways to fulfill this obligation of charity through a wide variety of formal institutions and informal relationships, zakat constitutes an enduring site of creative social practice.

124 Some mosques have formalized zakat committees, which are responsible for collecting zakat and making decisions about how to distribute funds, but this is more prevalent in large urban areas.
In light of the zakat discourse in Islamic social analysis and the theological significance of charitable giving, the practical dimension of helping the poor in various geographical and temporal Muslim contexts reveals how religion is embodied in everyday life. Whether institutional or informal, exploring particular practices of zakat allows us to see how charity connects to ideas about how best to navigate collective life. More specifically, the detailed study of a zakat practice in a particular socio-cultural context illuminates the ways in which religious categories are inflected in the struggle to redress social suffering. We now turn to the organization that is our case study, the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust, in order to better understand how ritual charity emerges as a dynamic response to poverty and a critical strategy for practicing Islamic ethics.

Practicing Zakat: A New Approach to a Traditional Ritual

The Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust was formed in the aftermath of severe communal riots between Hindus and Muslims following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh in 1992. After the mosque was destroyed by thousands of armed demonstrators, communal riots raged across many Indian cities, including in the historic quarters of Hyderabad’s Old City. For more than six months, riots erupted between Muslims and Hindus in the Old City while police tried to contain the violence by enforcing a curfew. The crisis of ethno-religious violence was both national and local, as many people linked the harm and injury they witnessed in the city to a larger national scale of suffering and a pervasive climate of fear. The violence of the riots dislodged a local sense of the city as shielded by its own traditions of cosmopolitanism. Muslims
ruled Hyderabad as a principality prior to Independence and currently still make up
almost half of the population, making the city a historically multi-religious one. Yet
many Muslims experienced the riots as the collapse of local multiculturalism into a
broader, dangerous national politics of identity that sought to ‘purify’ India of its
religious minorities. The trauma of the riots of 1992, along with the subsequent electoral
success of Hindu nationalists, came to be seen by Muslims as a turning point after which
their local security and national integration could no longer be taken for granted.

Within Hyderabad, there were many efforts to respond to the damage caused by
the eruption of communal violence in the Old City. These efforts included a small group
of people from prominent Sunni families in Hyderabad who wanted to help local victims
of the riots. They pooled the ritual donations from people in their elite circles into a
collective fund, which they formalized as the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust. The
Zakat Trust collects donations from its members as well as at large donations from the
broader community, including Hyderabadis who have migrated to the Gulf, the United
Kingdom, and the United States. While the charitable contribution of overseas
Hyderabadis can be significant given their earnings in valued currencies, the bulk of the
Trust’s funds come from local sources comprised of several large extended family
networks. Many of the Trust’s donors are building contractors who own multiple
properties, some of which have the entirety of their rental income dedicated to the Trust.
Several women donors of the Trust are also entrepreneurs: one owns a Yamaha
motorcycle dealership, and another is a franchisee of the U.S.-based Subway sandwich
chain, which has recently opened in India. Given that people make choices about how to
give their zakat, the Trust must establish itself as a legitimate collector of donations,
particularly since it stands independent from any mosque, madrassa, or religious group. The Trust draws on the social capital of the donors themselves, people who come from prominent, land-owning, entrepreneurial, and influential families to establish its credibility. The combination of their prosperity and piety results in a unique kind of cultural capital that inscribes them as both moral and social authorities and allows the Trust to institute itself a legitimate site for charitable social action.

The Trust has become a recognized nexus that harnesses donors’ charity and recipients’ needs with a broader project of improving society. The donors of the Trust desire to pay their zakat, and given their secure financial circumstances, many of their family members are not in need. Through the Trust, donors are able to not only give zakat, but they know it is being used to fulfill an identifiable social need. The Trust provides a direction for the zakat and identifies deserving recipients, all the while guaranteeing that funds are utilized in the best possible manner. One donor, Hasina Begum, explained that she preferred to give her zakat to the Trust because then she knows that it goes to “good poor people, you know, ones who really deserve it.”

The Trust adds value, in a sense, to zakat charity by minimizing the risk that it will be squandered, while simultaneously maximizing the social significance of the donations.

From a theological standpoint, zakat is intrinsically meritorious and simply giving it is praiseworthy. From a practical standpoint, donors to the Trust find increased satisfaction in identifying the ‘deserving’ poor: giving zakat at all is good, but giving it to ‘good’ poor people is even better. The Trust’s work therefore marks out a common moral

125 Both Geremek and Singer note the formation of the category of ‘the deserving poor’ in their historical accounts of charitable practices.
field. This moral field encompasses the donors themselves, who, in their efforts to ensure that their contributions will not inadvertently sanction unethical behaviour, assume the responsibility of making moral judgments through the language of ‘good’ and ‘deserving,’ which also confers an expectation of moral responsibility on the poor who receive zakat. Through the Trust’s nexus of charity, zakat inscribes both the donor and the recipient in the same field of morality.

In the initial years after the riots, the Zakat Trust focused on Muslim slum areas of the Old City, where they opened health care clinics, started income-generating projects, and created schools – the standard social services of religious charities involved in socioeconomic development. After almost a decade of running such projects, the volunteers and organizers of the Trust decided to shift the majority of their work into the field of education by offering scholarships to college and university students. One donor described the impetus behind this transition, saying “God is pushing us in this direction, pulling us.” Such theological language draws on traditions of prophecy and revelation in monotheistic traditions, in which the deity intervenes in human history and delivers messages and codes about how to structure social life. Framing the collective decisions of the Trust in theological terms references divine intervention in human history, and reflects a sense of the members that the Trust is not just responding to the needs of the poor but also to what they interpret as divine direction. The Trust still offers social services on a limited scale, but their primary focus is now higher education for Muslim students.
Fig. 1 One of the village schools founded by the Zakat Trust in the early period of the organization.

Distributing zakat funds in the form of scholarships to students requires significant coordination and energy. The Trust works through an extended network of representatives in rural districts to identify academically promising yet very poor students across the state of Andhra Pradesh. The Zakat Trust then holds dozens of ‘scholarship camps’ that draw anywhere between two and four hundred students. Donors volunteer to interview students individually, and then make decisions about whether or not a student will receive a scholarship.\textsuperscript{126} Based on my participant-observations, the majority of

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\textsuperscript{126} Ethnographies of Islamic charities have noted the distinction between benefactors/philanthropists, who give money (charity) and workers, who give care (solidarity),
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students who attend the scholarship camps receive some funding, as they have already passed through the initial screening of the district representative. The scholarship camps often take place over two days, depending on how many students attend and how many donors volunteer to conduct the interviews. The amount of zakat the Trust collects has increased every year since its inception, as has the number of students who receive scholarships. In 2005, the Trust dispersed an impressive amount of US$800,000 to approximately 15,000 students.

yet the Zakat Trust complicates this bifurcated view as the donors are also the volunteers, who contact students through interviews and other engagements about their future. For a comparative example of benefactors and social workers in contemporary Turkey, see Hilal Alkan-Zeybek, “Ethics of Care, Politics of Solidarity: Islamic Charitable Organizations in Turkey,” Ethnographies of Islam: Ritual Performance and Everyday Practices, Dupret et al, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) 144-152.
By shifting their focus to higher education, the Zakat Trust changed the way their zakat helps the poor. While the ritual collection of zakat remained constant, the Trust gave the distribution of charity a new focus as they refined their approach to poverty. One of the founding members of the Trust explained this shift to me:

Everything we were doing, it was all first aid, just stop-gap measures. We gave zakat, and still poor people were poor. We had to think about the long-term. Education is the key, if we want to change that. Not only in India, but everywhere, all over the world, Muslims have been sleeping the past 800 years. Right now, we’re just a liability on the nation. We’ve been in a shell. We’ve got to change that. We’ve got to bring the Muslims up, bring them out of the shell.

After almost a decade of directing their charitable donations to social services, the Trust members felt a need to transform the systems that made poor people “still” poor. In
shifting their attention to the structural determinants of poverty, the Trust identified education as the most enduring intervention they could make. Across the postcolonial world, education has been seen to be a crucial factor in development, by both the state and non-state actors, as in the case of the Zakat Trust. To be deprived of education is to succumb to forces of insularity – to “sleep,” or to be “in a shell,” in the donor’s words – which prevent a robust encounter with institutions of modernity such as the state and democratic citizenship.

The members of the Trust see that the landscape of Islam in India is in flux. The country has witnessed the increasing visibility and politicization of religion as one of the processes of globalization. The Trust also participates in this self-conscious formation of public religious space, yet unlike some forms of politicized religion that have transnational aims, its goals are expressly national and local. Their commitment to India, however, is an instance of complicated nationalism. In terms of how members of the Trust envision the position of Muslim communities in India, there is a fear of failing the nation – of ending up, in the words of the donor quoted above, a ‘liability’ on India. But there is also a fear that the state will fail its Muslim citizens, on the other. So when donors reflect on the situation of Indian Muslims, there is hope, fear, anxiety, determination, and longing in their words of the present and their projections of the future. The members of the Trust understand themselves as investing in the ongoing

postcolonial project of nation building by marking out one possible interpellation of Muslims in the broader formation of the state.

The Trust’s zakat practice encourages a distinctly Indian Muslim subjectivity as they believe that the social effects of a composite national culture support their wellbeing. These social effects can only be experienced locally, immediately, within everyday life. As Ubayd one of the founders of the Trust put it, “We don’t want to have a total madrassafication of Islam here. I mean, this is our city.” Ubayd presents “our city” in contrast to “madrassafication,” establishing a tension between cosmopolitanness on the one hand, and the kind of systematic formation of Islamic subjectivity that can happen in religious schools in the other. The city, with all of its attendant social and cultural differentiation, is a distinct (albeit unelaborated) symbol of a spatially bound field of concern. In his statement, Islam can either exist in the space of the city, or it can be reduced through a totalizing process. His phrasing frames the everyday lifeworld of the city as that which entails vital and enduring possibilities for religion.

It is worth noting that Ubayd’s statement does not problematize madrasas per se, but ‘madrasification,’ referencing the global processes transforming religious education in many Muslim societies. Like Muslims the world over, Hyderabadis are witness to the development of new religious institutions and affinities funded by the transnational movement of ideas and capital in the Islamic revival.128 While there is a dynamic interplay between the local and global dimensions involved in these new institutions of piety, Ubayd locates the impetus for this change as something exogenous to local history,

something outside of the city. He then positions himself in relation to the changes he sees taking place not only spatially but ethically: when he claims ‘this is our city’ he is making a proprietary claim about Hyderabad and also about his own sense of responsibility for Islamic tradition in light of the global context of transnational religious movements.

Since its inception, the Hyderabad Zakat Trust has maintained a focus on meeting the needs of the poor and indigent in accordance with Islamic traditions regarding charity, but their strategies for doing so have consciously shifted from social service provision to supporting higher education. In making this change, they understand themselves as consistently responding to the Qur’anic obligation of helping the poor. They are not moving away from the ideal of giving; rather, they see themselves as intensifying the possible transformation of the circumstances of poverty for both individual student recipients and also the broader community of Muslims in India. Their hope is that higher education transforms poverty. Their strategy of supporting the transformation of poverty through scholarships involves not just financial support, however, but also encompasses a clear effort to infuse in zakat recipients a commitment to moral action and re-frame their sense of themselves as ethical Muslims. The idea is not just to transform the personal circumstances of poverty of zakat recipients but to inculcate in them a sense of responsibility as Muslims towards transforming the structural determinants of poverty writ broadly.
Poverty, Gender, and Ethical Subjectivity

The Zakat Trust does not engage in any explicit religious instruction, yet it does seek to promote the internalization and expression of Islamic ethics. This exercise of ethical formation consists of a written examination of the fundamental teachings of Islam followed by a formal and public oath. At the beginning of each scholarship camp, all of the students who receive money from the Trust are given a religious literacy test. The test is conducted and graded like a regular school test: timed at one hour, incorrect answers marked in red pen, and any overall score less than 60% seen as ‘not passing’. The test includes questions such as: How many cycles of prostrations are to be performed at each of the daily prayer times? What is the meaning of the call to prayer? What are the names of the rightly guided caliphs? Is it permissible to say “assalaam ’alaikum” (an Arabic greeting of ‘peace be unto you’) to non-Muslims? (The correct answer is yes, it is a greeting to be used with everyone.) The donor-volunteers correct the test themselves, and students are asked about their results at the beginning of their interview. Once, when I myself was conducting interviews, I heard the donor next to me scold a student about his poor marks.129 “How could you not know the five prayer times? Who is teaching you about this? How do you learn your prayers, your Qur’an?” The boy, visibly nervous, explained that he didn’t learn how to read Qur’an well because his house was so far from the mosque in his village and he had to look after his brothers and sisters. When she heard this, the donor-volunteer did not offer any response other than to give a resigned “Hmph!” In this instance, the donor’s put forth her ideal of Islamic knowledge as a

129 In my capacity as a volunteer, I conducted interviews, but per the guidance of the representative of the Trust, I did not grade the Islam tests as did other volunteers.
standard of evaluation, while the boy offered a description of the exigencies of his everyday life; neither of them offered a strategy to reconcile the situation, suggesting a moment of mutual recognition of both the ideal and the contextual constraints in realizing it, and the gap between the two.

The Islam test is the very first subject of interaction between the donor-volunteers and the students, prior to any conversation about their family situation or their studies. It structures the encounter between zakat donor-volunteers and students as one marked by Islamic tradition. The test divulges some of the unspoken but crucial conditions which characterize the Zakat Trust’s approach to social development. First, it establishes the question of religion before any other concern, fronting the primacy of being Muslim over other aspects of any individual’s multiple identities. Secondly, it emphasizes the project of knowledge acquisition and being knowledgeable. Students are not involved in an interpretive project with open-ended questions such as “Why do you pray?” or “What does it mean to be Muslim?” Rather, they are tested on recognized articles of religious knowledge. Thirdly, it uses the form of a standardized test, a bureaucratic and ideally fair means of assessing and ranking learners, orienting both the students and the donor-volunteers towards the appraising of achievement – or lack thereof – in each young person. This test holds out a promise of social recognition for those students who can display knowledge of Islam. And finally, it establishes the religious and moral authority of the donor-volunteer who grades the student’s knowledge of Islam, chastising or praising her or him, suggesting remedies or offering validation. Prior to the test, students may hear religious language conventionally used in opening remarks, which can often include Arabic phrases such as ‘by God’s grace,’ and ‘through God’s mercy.’ Yet while
these phrases mark the occasion, it is only with the test that the Trust makes an effort to explicitly engage the question of religion and establish Islam as the foundation of the scholarship camp.

As the final act of the scholarship camps, after all the students have taken the test and been interviewed about their family resources and studies, the Zakat Trust makes a comprehensive moral claim on the students. After all of the students have been gone through the process, they are required to take a two-part oath. In the first part of the oath, each student promises to pay back the same amount of money that the Zakat Trust has given him or her, once he or she secures professional employment. In the second part of the oath, the Trust also asks students to revoke any claims to a dowry.
Fig. 4 The Zakat Trust oath certificate
The exact text of the oath reads:

I hereby swear in the name of Allah (SWT) that I shall refund the said amount taken from the Hyderabad Zakat & Charitable Trust for my education as soon as I get my first job salary. The amount would be as my donation to Hyderabad Zakat & Charitable Trust to be given as assistance to other poor and yateem students.

I further declare that I shall not demand any dowry at the time of my marriage nor I will allow my parents to demand any dowry from the girl’s side directly or indirectly (only for male applicants). The students sign and date the oath while still seated in the interview hall.

Interestingly, the text of the oath is in English, while the Islam test is entirely in Urdu. The Islam test relates to foundational knowledge, and given that the students take the test prior to the interview and the oath, it establishes a symbolic gateway through which students must pass. The Trust uses Urdu to reflect a sense of roots, origins, and tradition. If the test covers material that students know from their past, the oath relocates the students in the future, focusing on potential actions and decisions. It specifies an ethical path for students as they navigate two primary life transitions: the entry into marriage and the workplace. The promise to become involved in public life by contributing to the work of the Trust, and to participate in social change by resisting dowry, is signified by the use of English. The oath marks a shift into the public, into sociality, articulating this shift as ethical by structuring it as a pledge. Given that the oath relates to questions of public life and sociality, the use of English – rather than Urdu – implicitly makes claims about the terms of future communication: English, once seen as

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130 For an analysis of the intersection between language and religious identity, see Van der Veer.
the language of the symbolic domination of India by Britain, now also serves as an idiom of ‘success’ in the age of globalization.

In the Trust’s discourse, success and prosperity are linked to the responsibility for collective wellbeing. The money that scholarship recipients return to the Trust is supposed to be used for the purpose of helping advance another person’s education. The idea is to inculcate a sense of group responsibility among Muslims for their collective betterment: just as students today are helped by the Trust, they are called to imagine themselves as future donors to the Trust, helping to fund the education of students who are experiencing the same acute needs they themselves are experiencing today. Through this act of imagination, the students can cultivate the donor’s disposition. Beyond imagining the accumulation of surplus resources which can be redistributed, they are called on to have the desire to actively assist the more vulnerable, marginalized, and neglected of the Muslim community.

Linking the repayment of scholarship money and the refusal of dowry explicitly introduces the question of gender into the issue of poverty. According to Islamic jurisprudence, the bride is to receive a mahar, which becomes her personal property to dispose of as she chooses.\(^{132}\) In India, and across South Asia, the popular practice of dowry works in the reverse: the young woman’s family pays a sum – in cash or in kind – to the groom’s family. Recent migrations to Europe, the US, and the Gulf have brought increasing pressure to raise larger dowries, which has resulted in large numbers of girls across India’s Muslim communities who struggle to put together a sufficient dowry to

marry. Throughout my fieldwork, I was repeatedly told about girls who are ‘so poor, they can’t afford to get married.’ Dowries are often related to the wage potential of the groom, as the greater the project income of the groom, the larger the dowry to be given. In Hyderabad, for example, marrying an auto-rickshaw driver (who earns roughly US $2-4/day) can cost a dowry of several hundred dollars, while a groom who has completed a Master’s degree in the U.S. can claim a dowry as high as US$30,000.

Although certain elites and rural castes resist it, dowry is still commonly practiced in India. This widespread Indian cultural practice compels those Muslims who put forth a critique of dowry to make choices about the language through which they frame their efforts. Often this results in identifying dowry under the rubric of ‘culture’ and then granting ‘religion,’ Islam, the countervailing authority to be the basis for cultural change. Zakat Trust members acknowledge that current practices of dowry in Muslim communities contravene Islamic jurisprudence. Yet when they censure the Indian cultural practice of dowry, they do not emphasize the transgression of Islamic law as much as they stress dowry as a violation of the basic dignity of young Muslim girls, a dignity to which Trust members affirm they are entitled as equal creations of God.

According to Zakat Trust organizers, the practice of dowry cripples Muslim economic and gender relations. The Trust maintains that all Muslims are equal, and that both young women and men should be given the opportunity to make a constructive contribution to society. Zakat Trust members embrace a theory and theology of gender complementarianism, which “emphasizes the equality of the sexes in Islam but stipulates this equality ever more urgently on the divinely decreed, immutable, and complete
differences of their natures.”\footnote{Barbara Stowasser, \textit{Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 37.} This translates in practice to a determined support of the education and employment of young women, albeit in gendered professions such as teaching or nursing. Dowry becomes a crucial factor that can jeopardize the educational and professional attainment of girls. In the structure of patriarchal joint families prevalent in Indian society, the practice of dowry often means that a family musters its limited financial resources to pay for a young woman’s wedding, thereby closing the door on any possibility of finding additional resources to fund her education.

All Muslim students have lower levels of education attainment in the local educational context, but Muslim girls especially so. Across the state of Andhra Pradesh, most Muslim girls are first-generation learners; only 34\% attend primary school, and less than 15\% complete high school through grade ten.\footnote{Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, eds. \textit{Educating Muslim Girls : A Comparison of Five Indian Cities} (New Delhi : Women Unlimited/Kali for Women, 2005) 107.} While all poorer students in India suffer from the limitations of national and local government to guarantee universal primary education, girls can face additional socio-cultural barriers to education, including the practice of restricting girls from attending school under the justification of the religious mandate of gender seclusion (\textit{purdah}).\footnote{Hasan and Menon 112.} The Zakat Trust wants to eliminate any space for Muslims to justify the repression and exclusion of young girls from education in the name of Islam.

Dowry reinforces gender discrimination, which in turn reinforces low educational attainment in the Muslim community, further entrenching poverty. As the Trust sees it, the ethical rejection of dowry reverses this cycle, affirming both gender equality and...
economic success, and, more importantly, linking the two. The Trust makes the practice of zakat instrumental to the negotiation of gender relations, both in the intimate sphere of the family, and in the public sphere of labor and production. Their practice of zakat pushes charity to become a response to structural deprivation, and marks poverty as a gendered phenomenon. By gendered, I am referring to the feminization of poverty, in which patriarchy and poverty become mutually constitutive axes of domination of poor Muslim women. I am also referring to the way choices made in the distribution of scarce resources ramify structural power relations between men and women. The Trust recognizes that both men and women play gendered roles in the cycle of poverty, and makes it incumbent on both young men and women to resist the cultural pressures of dowry. By supporting counter-cultural resistance to dowry, the Trust makes space for an ethical Muslim subjectivity that affirms gender equality.

Patronage and the Re-interpretation of Tradition

Zakat practices differ across and within India’s diverse Muslim communities. Many people who give zakat do so informally, while others prefer to give through their local mosques, while still others give to local trusts. In addition to the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust, other zakat practices try to address structural inequalities through cultural critique. A few smaller zakat trusts, for example, have followed the regional impetus towards microenterprise as a key strategy for ‘women’s empowerment,’ thereby performing functions similar to an NGO, yet maintaining the nominal framework of an Islamic institution. This reflects the extent to which Muslim institutions in India internalize the concepts and discourses of ‘development’ writ broadly, both because of a
desire to participate in social transformation and because ‘development’ discourses effectively capture what people experience as organic concerns. Prior to the emergence of the Zakat Trust, other social reformers across India identified the practice of dowry as a critical site of transformation. Despite national legislation against dowry in 1961, many sociologists have noted the growth in dowry across caste, religious, and class groups in Indian society. The Trust participates in this broader critique of dowry, yet locates the counter-cultural resistance to dowry within a specifically Islamic social ethic. Among other anti-dowry movements, the Trust is unique in that it situates counter-cultural resistance in religious charity. Their efforts are also unique when seen in the light of the diverse zakat practices across India: not only do they ask that the recipients of zakat – the students – become future donors of charity, they further posit charity and gender equality as parallel expressions of Islamic social ethics.

The Trust’s practice of zakat is also innovative in terms of using an oath in the disbursement of charity. According to tradition, zakat is to be given unconditionally, freely. Yet the donor-volunteers of the Trust feel they must alter the cultural worlds of poor students in order to break the interlocking cycles of poverty and gender-bias. One donor-volunteer named Hussain, a successful building contractor in his thirties, came up with the idea of the oath and authored its wording. He shared with me the internal conflicts he has about the practice of asking students to take an oath. “I know this could

136 Escobar xvii.
137 Gandhi and other counter-colonial reformers of the early twentieth century also supported dowry abolition, but differed in opinion regarding to what extent it should constitute a priority in relation to other potential social reforms.
make our zakat impure, you know. I know that. But we have to do it. We have them there, we have this opportunity. The stakes are too high – we have to say something.” As a religious mediation of poverty, zakat has its sanctioned interpretations, but as far as Hussain is concerned, the Trust must be creative in working with the practices that already exist in the religious culture if they are to fulfill the ethical ideal of sharing God’s grace with everyone in the community. Seen in that light, dowry emerges as an obvious pressure point for intervention. When the strategy of constructing new practices of zakat produces an inner conflict of conscience, Hussain and other volunteers state that they must rely on God’s forgiveness. As Hussain describes it, their religious hermeneutics must shift to respond to the immediacy of the material reality of poverty as it pushes against extramaterial religious mediations and interpretations. In his own words, he calls this the ‘have to.’ While asking zakat recipients to take an oath may be unusual – if not unprecedented – in Muslim societies, the members of the Trust do take this step and place their zakat practice between the exigencies of the local situation and God’s infinite mercy.

The use of an oath in the distribution of zakat marks a departure from previous practices of religious charity, yet in other respects, the Trust’s work can be seen as drawing on historical traditions of patronage in Hyderabad. Prior to Independence, the Nizam – the Muslim ruler of the independent princely state of Hyderabad – provided for the needs of the vulnerable, so that anyone seeking medical help or other kinds of assistance could seek assistance through one of his charitable trusts. Throughout the twentieth century, the Nizam’s Charitable Trust, the social welfare institution he founded, continued to provide emergency medical care, built schools and one college, while also
sponsoring scholarships for advanced study. Other members of the royal family also became involved in charitable social projects, including Princess Essin, the Turkish daughter-in-law of the Nizam, who started one of the first colleges for women.

Ruling elites in Hyderabad institutionalized forms of charity that provided health care and education for the poor, and established a long-standing expectation of elite care for the vulnerable. These became part of the project to modernize the state in the early twentieth century. Now that Hyderabad is integrated into the postcolonial Indian state and its democratic politics, those traditions of patronage (and the forms in which they were objectified – trusts and schools) still shape expectations of social welfare even as they are no longer constrained to ruling elites. The Zakat Trust implicitly draws on the symbolic effects of earlier trusts in shaping its own charitable social projects. Donors have claimed the institutional form of a trust – recognized as a locus of responsibility for social welfare – while reframing this institution within the context of their own times and needs: a trust is no longer a mere extension of patronage, but can be a collective initiative which stands as a portal to public life. Given the elite status of the Zakat Trust’s donors and the elite roots of the trust as a social welfare institution, one could interpret their efforts as a new kind of patronage for twenty-first century India.

Yet if the Trust donors are patrons, then their patronage is not a mere reiteration of earlier charity in the city. Its telos is not the affirmation of their own status, but the deployment of status and resources in transforming the social conditions of those who need charity. Their new Trust bears the name of the city, not the name of rulers or donors. What pushes against a historically royal model of patronage is zakat itself: all Muslims are obliged to give zakat if they can. The obligation rests evenly on all those who have
the minimum standing wealth. People are free to support and participate in the work of
the Trust as they so choose, and this open quality makes seeing the Zakat Trust as a
contemporary extension of elite patronage more difficult. Certainly, the Trust draws on
the symbolic association of trusts with social welfare (elite notions of social
responsibility), but their resources come from religious charity rather than royal wealth.
Ultimately, unlike the charitable trusts patronized by the Nizam and his family, the Zakat
Trust is trying to use charity to change the structures of poverty and the cultural practices
which shape gender relations in Indian Muslim communities.

**Reflexivity and Autonomy in Zakat**

The Zakat Trust’s concerted efforts against dowry speak to its deeply embedded
nature in Indian society. So what actually happens to the students when they try to resist
dowry in their families? One day during a scholarship camp, I saw one of the donor-
volunteers in what looked like a heated, or at least emotionally intense, exchange.
Afterwards, I asked Najmah what happened. “Oh, that guy, I could just wring his neck!
He’s getting a scholarship for his second year of medical school. When I asked him how
he paid his fees last year, he said ‘Well, my brother got married.’ He said they had to do
it because when his sister got married, they had borrowed a lot of money from a
moneylender to pay her dowry. How does he expect things to stop?! Oh, I could just
shake him! What is he thinking?” As this incident illustrates, refusing to give dowry can
be extremely complicated. Not only because of the financial decisions of a joint family
anticipate the future income or payment of dowry, but because the students are young
people still under the care of their families. The Zakat Trust approaches students as ethical *individuals*, while many of the major decisions of young people’s lives are made not only by them, but within a joint family system. Dowry is certainly part of the structures that engender poverty, but it is also an occasion for many young people to experience the full workings of family decision-making. As such, it is a practice which touches a deep source of embodied affect and emotion. Giving dowry in India is not a simple capitulation of Muslim identity: it is also, in other respects, a formative experience of the relationships which structure lifeworlds in the most intimate and deep ways, affirming one’s membership and identity within the family.

The Trust’s practice of zakat structures the encounter between donors and recipients as an intervention. The interactions between donor-volunteers and the recipients of their zakat scholarships are time-bound, during interviews, and therefore fleeting. Zakat *does* collapse social boundaries, but in this case only on a temporary and situational basis. The donors do not enter into the life world of the students, nor see their suffering up close. For members of the Trust, zakat is a religious practice that is also a world-making practice: they encounter the suffering of students with a clear sense of what needs to be changed, and how to change it. The donor’s view of the student’s world is already predetermined by the anticipation of scarcity and deprivation. There is an irony, or tragedy, of misrecognition here: they want to students to act, to make countercultural ethical stands as individuals, but they don’t really know or see them as individuals, people with unique family circumstances, possibly idiosyncratic religious interpretations, and even independent epistemes. They assume that the students who receive zakat as scholarships will practice dowry, even as they also assume that the
students will develop the fortitude to stand against it, through their help. Perhaps this set of assumptions demonstrates that the donors of the Trust appreciate the intractability of certain cultural practices, what Bourdieu calls “the extraordinary inertia which results in the inscription of social structures in bodies.” These assumptions also establish the need for donors to disrupt the cultural world of the poor students, in an attempt to divert the trajectory of the student’s lives away from the suffering of poverty. The asymmetric dynamic of intervention – including the fact that it is time-bound – limits the interaction between zakat donors and recipients.

Yet if the brevity of the encounter prevents donors from an intimate exploration of the life worlds of students, it also serves as a kind of release of students. Through its scholarship program, the Trust shapes the distribution of zakat so that it creates a reflexive moment for those who receive it. Each student is called on to think about their future actions, in terms of their studies, but also in terms of gender roles and contributions to the broader social welfare. While donors do not establish a close relationship with the recipients of their zakat, neither do they enter into an enduring asymmetrical relationship with them. If there is a degree of misrecognition, then it does not devolve into domination. The Trust draws on zakat to mark out a moment of reflexivity on religious and socio-cultural practices. They ask students to commit to future actions in the family and in the public sphere. The Trust is trying to activate an Islamic ethical disposition which anchors students in a world that still contains the possibility of development and change, a world in which despair and resignation is not a

139 Bourdieu 172.
given. They give zakat, and through this zakat they try to give the students a sense of the world as a world in which choices and responsibilities shape life and make sense.

The representation of the social world as a sphere of action and creation connects to the Trust’s understanding of Islam. The Trust conveys through zakat that the practice of Islam cannot be collapsed into the politics of identity, ritual action, or mere discourse, but rather calls on people to act, and specifically to support the broader wellbeing of other Muslims. Achille Mbembe notes the temptation, in thinking about the postcolonial condition, to “reduce everything into a struggle of representation.”140 Rather than taking up the question of representation of Islam and Muslims, the Trust proposes concrete deeds – resisting dowry and giving charity to promote education – through which young Muslims can take part in the ongoing process of sustaining ‘the Muslim community.’ A concern for the material conditions of poverty and gender merges with the call to Islam in the Trust’s emphasis on the need for instrumental and intentional actions. The Trust makes use of zakat in a pedagogical fashion to establish a sense of the world and of Islam as requiring action, correction, and redress. The scholarship oath is their effort to bind students to this understanding of the world, while also leaving them free to enact the commitments they have made to resist dowry and to contribute zakat in the future. Donors of the Trust may miss perceiving the unique circumstances and lives of students (foregoing a more intimate understanding of the experience of poverty), but they also accord students the possibility of autonomous ethical action in society and in the social microcosm of their families.

140 Mbembe 14.
Through its scholarship program, the Trust shapes the distribution of zakat so that it creates a reflexive moment for those who receive it. Each student is called on to think about their future actions, in terms of their studies, but also in terms of their gender roles and the contributions to the broader social welfare. Like social projects of the Islamic revival, the Trust presents an understanding of the world in which piety and modernity are interdependent. Laura Deeb, in her study of Shi’is in Beirut, Lebanon, argues that modernity in the pious cultural sphere of the Islamic revival entails being ‘civilized’ as opposed to ‘backward,’ material progress, and spiritual progress. A similar understanding of piety and modernity can be seen in the Trust’s zakat practice that links ethical assertions of Islam with professional development and achievements to promote individual progress.

Like other groups, the Trust uses the opposition of modern/backward in order to describe the ideal social disposition of Indian Muslims. But the Zakat Trust’s efforts differ in some key ways. First, the Trust is concerned with gender discrimination and articulates a cultural critique to disarm ‘traditional’ practices that contribute to the suppression of girls’ education and poverty. Donors believe zakat must take on issues of gender and the structural dimension of poverty in order to bring about God’s grace and bounty. Secondly, the Trust consciously maintains that social welfare should result from individual efforts. Leaving students to enact the commitments they make upon taking the

oath – what I earlier referred to as the ‘release’ – reflects the Trust’s belief that individuals need to learn how to make ethical assertions in the social sphere.

The Trust maintains the importance of caring about the social health of the Muslim community, but they do not support what could be called hegemonic social work projects, in which an individual’s appearance, bearing, language, and time are collectively organized. The Trust tries to influence students’ actions, but it still marks out a space in which they must personally reach that moment of decision. In some ways, this can be seen as sanctioning a kind of authenticity: students can only genuinely resist dowry and freely contribute future zakat if they have the autonomy to do so. The Trust requires students to make a symbolic commitment to future actions, to be sure, but the fact that these actions remain in the future grants a measure of autonomy to students. The Zakat Trust’s theology remains minimal and more informally elaborated when compared with Islamic revivalist groups that try to exert a more formative influence on their affiliates through carefully organized programmatic activities. Yet the Trust still presents to students a structured occasion for reflexive thought and practice through zakat.

Through the oath against dowry and the pledge of future zakat donation, the Trust inhabits a locus of persuasion that is explicitly pedagogical in its attempts to promote social change and an ethical Muslim subjectivity. In their understanding, Islam calls on people to end poverty and gender discrimination. They take the occasion of their donation of ritual charity and through that act of giving, they attempt to give students a sense of themselves as people who can change their world and the world around them so that both might come to be more closely inline with Islam. Their efforts can be considered in light of their desire to promote social change, in terms of poverty and gender discrimination, as
well as their desire to continue, embody, and follow traditions of Islam. In both ways of viewing their work, the Trust wants to be prescriptive and directive – it wants to shape the actions of the recipients of their zakat – and at the same time, it affirms the importance of individual ethical action and ‘releases’ students to fulfill, or not, their oath. The Trust, like others who promote particular directions of social change, maintains a delicate position between the prescription of action and integrity of release, and between the pedagogical desire to shape change and the individual autonomy necessarily implied in persuasion.

The stress on individual ethical action in the social sphere parallels many donors’ understanding and practice of Islam. In terms of religious practice, donors of the Trust organize themselves in a relatively nonhierarchical fashion, independent from other organizations or piety movements. Many of the donors participate in religious study groups that they have organized amongst themselves. Throughout the duration of my field research, I attended meetings of the women’s dars, teachings about Islam, which were led by two members who had acquired more advanced learning while living and working in the Gulf. The topics and themes of the lessons were entirely structured by the two women teachers, and covered the Qur’an, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, ethics, and rituals. The group was not large (twenty-odd women attended any given meeting) and entirely self-directed. On Islamic holidays, donors participated in shared rituals, such as iftars to break fast during Ramadan, that were held at each other’s homes. Within the group of donor-volunteers, there are people who are recognized and respected for their religious learning, but they do not hold increased power or influence in terms of making decisions about the activities of the Trust.
Once, when I was having lunch with one of the donors, Hameeda Begum, she described a sense of individual responsibility she thought was important by contrasting it to the organization of the Islamic revivals movement Tabligh-i Jamaat, which encourages individual piety.\footnote{142}{For an overview of the Tablighi Jamaat, see Metcalf.} “My brother, you know, he has gotten so taken up with those Tablighi people. I really feel for my sister-in-law now. I mean, even when she is sick, or her son is having problems in school, her husband goes to his sheikh to get advice. I mean, your child is sick and you need advice? I think people have to have the sense inside to do what is right. It’s your wife, your own child, you should know already they need you. You don’t need a 

\textit{maulvi} to tell you that! That’s your \textit{diin}.” Hameeda’s thinking here posits the necessity of individual ethical reflection and practical action, rather than depending on a religious teacher’s authoritative prescriptions. The donors of the Trust respect the religious authority of those with advanced knowledge about Islamic traditions, and this respect is grounded in a belief that traditional religious knowledge should be acquired in order that it more fully inform action in everyday life. Hameeda’s statement locates piety and the ability to follow ‘your \textit{diin}’ within the sphere of action determined by immediate interpersonal relationships and the family, rather than following a particular code of pious expression formalized by an external authority.

The formality of the oath and the Trust’s location of ethical action in individual students raise the question of the efficacy of this zakat practice. Does the oath effect action? Do students repay their scholarships and forsake dowry? Since the oath has only
been implemented in the past few years of the scholarship program, the Trust does not yet have an indication as to whether or not most students return the amount of their scholarship money. That remains to be seen when the current generation of students seeks employment upon finishing their studies and begins to earn wages. It also remains to be seen whether students resist dowry, and how they negotiate making such choices within their families.

Although the Trust cannot yet claim ‘success’ on either component of the oath, their efforts still affect students as they move into the public sphere. As Bourdieu notes, “the symbolic transgression of a social frontier has a liberatory effect in its own right because it enacts the unthinkable.”\(^{143}\) Whether or not students fulfill the oath they have taken, the Trust still can articulate its critique of dowry and advance its support of contributing to zakat. This articulation itself opens up space for imaging action, for shaping a particular understanding of what it means to be Muslim. Ideally, this kind of symbolic action found in the oath taking accrues and coalesces over time, making action increasingly more likely. The Trust maintains a cultural critique of dowry and encourages zakat donation as an ethical stance – for the students, but also for themselves. The articulation of Islamic social ethics is ethical in and of itself, even as questions about actual choices the students’ may make remains open and the practical dimension remains in the realm of suggestion. Ethics here involves a claim about what that the future should look like, and for the Zakat Trust, that would be the ability to consign the practice of dowry and gender discrimination to the past.

\(^{143}\) Bourdieu 236.
Zakat as Practical Theodicy

As part of my field research with the Zakat Trust, I conducted several qualitative interviews of donors who have been volunteering with the Trust since its inception. The people I interviewed were either people with whom I had formed friendships, or people involved in key decisions of the Trust, or both. These interviews complement the observations I made while participating as a volunteer with the Trust. When I volunteered with the Trust, I took the place of a donor, interviewing students during scholarship camps. The qualitative interviews enabled me to explore some questions about the Trust in a more in-depth fashion than I could during the scholarship camps, when the focus remained on the students (and the need to speak with all of them in the allotted time).

Two facets of the Trust’s zakat practice emerged from these interviews that reveal some of the subtler dimensions of the experience of giving charity. The first relates to the way donors present their own experience of giving zakat and being involved with the Trust. Using theological idioms to convey their experiences, their narratives are characterized by revelations of different worlds within their own society and community. The second facet relates to the awareness of the cyclical dynamics of poverty and the complex interplay of diverse factors that keep poor people poor.

While the public discourse of the Trust involves positive affirmations about the possibility of ethical action to transform poverty and society, in interviews, donors voiced despair over the intractability of poverty and an awareness of the limited efficacy of their
efforts. This second facet is the aspect of uncertainty and doubt regarding the entrenched reality of poverty in India, and this deeper consideration of the cycle of poverty is not formally acknowledged in the Trust’s zakat practice. When taken together, these two facets shift the analysis of the Trust into an existential dimension that allows us to see how zakat becomes what I call a ‘practical theodicy.’ Historically, theodicy has stood for the attempt to reconcile theologically the existence of God and the reality of evil. Through zakat, those involved with the Trust have a way to wrestle with this issue albeit at the practical level and not the theological one.

The language that donors use in narrating their understanding of giving zakat shows how religion is inflected in the experience of encountering the suffering of others. Zakat occasions a change in how donors perceive themselves, both in relation to other people and in relation to the divine. Ahmad Hussain, a building contractor who lives with his family in the New City, volunteers for the Trust. When I asked him about his experiences volunteering, he described an encounter he had during a scholarship camp. The following is the complete narrative of this incident, taken from the transcript of our interview:

We were out visiting some students who needed money for their school fees. In the afternoon, I took a break. I went to the mosque to do my prayers. After prayers, I sat there for a while. When I came out, I met this young man, he was running a foodstall that was there across from the mosque. All by himself. I watched him, thinking that he was alone there.

So we called him over and asked him about his situation. You know, he had got a scholarship from us the year before! I didn’t recognize him because I wasn’t at that scholarship camp the last year. He was the only support for his family, at 15 years, a college boy. He showed me how he kept his engineering notes by the cash box so he could study when there
were no customers. When he explained this some strange feeling was flowing in my heart, *meera dil mein* (in my heart). It is so much! He is so young! This feeling was in my heart. You are humbled.

Sometimes that happens, you know, when you are at a scholarship camp. All of a sudden you are breathless. This spirit transforms you and you see for a minute how you really are. It takes your breath away. It leaves you breathless, this feeling. I can’t explain it. It’s just there. It’s the ultimate.

This encounter with the young engineering student affected Ahmad, and he describes it in the language of a revelation – seeing ‘how you really are.’ This self-perception results from perceiving an other, appreciating the young man’s responsibility in the face of family obligations and his fortitude in persevering with his studies. In this narrative, Ahmad describes feeling humbled, and also posits that this kind of transformation is an on-going possibility in the course of being part of the Trust’s scholarship camp: the transformation is ‘something that happens.’ He clarifies that the transformation is caused by ‘this spirit,’ which enables a true perception of self and other. What is striking about this narration is not just the transformations attributed to the spirit, but the way this transformation is coded as different from everyday modes of perception. ‘Some strange feeling,’ being ‘breathless,’ – this language conveys a sense of disruption, even as it is connected to the most fundamental signs of human life, the heart and breath. This peak experience is such that Ahmad struggles to find language for it, and finally denies any power to ‘explain’ it. The ‘feeling’ is self-evident, ‘just there,’ and in the end Ahmad closes this narrative with an all-encompassing reference to ‘the ultimate.’
Hassan Khan is another donor and volunteer of the Trust, also a building contractor, who describes in theological language changes in perception that resulted from volunteering. Hassan and his wife have been involved with the Trust since it first started. They give their zakat to the Trust, and they also have their own charitable project of giving micro-loans to would-be autorickshaw drivers. In addition to this personal charitable work he still interviews students as his schedule permits. Like Ahmad, during the interview Hassan described the way that the experience of volunteering resulted in personal transformation:

If you go the villages, it is really heart-wrenching to see. Especially when you take people to do these interviews, you know, out in the villages, they are so shaken up by that. They see small children, small kids, stonecutters’ children, locksmiths’ kids. They are sitting on the side of the road, working for their parents, trying to make money. You see them and it shakes you. It’s a sobering experience to go to these things.

For Hassan, the distance – the literal, physical distance – he travels when volunteering to do interviews exposes him to the materiality of poverty, such as he may not see in the same way as he moves about his life in the city. Like Ahmad, he describes seeing and feeling in this time as different. Those who do this see things that they don’t normally see, and can be left ‘shaken,’ ‘sobered,’ and altered. Here, the city/village contrast emphasizes the breaking open of perception. Interestingly, the description of this perceptual shift in terms of rural-urban contrasts belies the claims of cosmopolitanism as a conscious and open social orientation. It is in leaving the city and entering the village that Hassan’s sense of himself gets shaken. When I asked him why he volunteers for the Trust, Hassan did not talk about the obligation of charity or the purification of wealth, but rather talked about the effects of his participation in theological terms:
It is really great. I really feel blessed that we are not the person on the other side. Doing this is very sobering and really, really satisfying, deep in your soul. You feel satisfied. But deep down I know that it is nothing I am doing, it is just his grace, God’s grace. It’s very easy that I could’ve been born that side, 100%. It is not boasting or trying to be humble, it is just God gives you opportunities. You use them.

The language of ‘other side,’ ‘that side,’ evokes a sense of difference, one that Hassan attributes to chance. He could have ‘been born that side,’ but he was not; and that implicates him in ethical obligations and a kind of divine action. There is an awareness of his position – of not being on the other side. This has a slightly different nuance than Ahmad’s reflection, in which he emphasized an awareness of things as they ‘really are’ – a claim that relates more to essence. Hassan, in contrast, emphasizes his own position in differentiated social space. The ethical obligation to use the opportunities given by God is deeply connected to the recognition that chance plays a role in determining individual circumstances. Being on that side is defined by lacking the opportunities, which are also blessings, while being on this side obliges one to use them.

Hassan’s evocative language reflects consciousness of what Bourdieu calls the “profound differentiation in the degree to which the social universe offers stable chances” to people. Hassan is on ‘this side’ through God’s grace, and it is this same grace that acts through him so that he can affect the life of someone on the other side. Hassan describes two levels here: an epistemological one in which a person consciously uses opportunities given by God; and another ‘deeper’ level, in which this action is the movement of divine grace through

144 Bourdieu 225.
differentiated social space. The discriminations of the social universe –
discrimination in the sense of marking difference, but also in the sense of
inequality of chance – obtain on one perceptual level. On a deeper level, however,
the divine power of grace comes upon people to enable them to transcend or
transverse that same social universe, so that they can perceive the life on ‘that
side,’ and perhaps even make it better.

Theorists such as Michel Foucault have conceptualized the experiences
coded as religious as ‘limit experiences.’¹⁴⁵ Both Ahmad and Hassan narrate the
experience of limits being traversed, removed, or exceeded. A different kind of
limit experience, however, can be understood in terms of theodicy, a question
about the existence of evil in the light of the omnipotent power of the divine. One
of the donors I interviewed, Hussain, the author of the oath discussed earlier,
shared his reflections on poverty in light of the Trust’s zakat practice. Earlier, I
discussed his concerns about the possible theological complications of asking
zakat recipients to take an oath, and how he resolved (or endured) them by
believing in God’s power to forgive and be merciful. Later on, in the course of
our interview, his reflections about the Trust’s zakat practice brought up a
different set of concerns – not about the theological justification of the oath, but
about the very structures of poverty. When he told me that he was the one who
wrote the oath, I asked him why he felt it was important to resist dowry. His
answer brought up a dimension of poverty not explicitly discussed by the Zakat

¹⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, Religion and Culture (Manchester: Manchester University, 1999) 23.
Trust: moneylenders and debt. The following quotes at length from the transcript of our interview:

Yes, people give dowry, they accept it. But what to do? We cannot accept it. Nobody will tell you this. I am telling you this. I’ll take you and place you in front of the people who practice it. Do you know slavery is practiced in India because of dowry? Do you know how it functions? Like this: I have a daughter to be married. I go to the moneylender. I don’t have anything to mortgage, so I mortgage my son. For how much, you know? About 6000 rupees.

So what happens is, I take 6000 rupees and come back. My son starts to go to this moneylender every single morning and starts to work for him. Right from sweeping his floor, to washing his clothes, everything. He works like a slave. His salary is fixed, say at 200 rupees per month. The 6000 rupees which is given as a loan… this 200 rupees which is the salary is deducted by the moneylender as the interest on that loan, payment for food or whatever.

So this guy is mortgaged for life. After one year, my second daughter is to be married, so I take my second son and mortgage him. After another year, my third daughter is to be married and I don’t have any sons, so I go to a different moneylender and I mortgage myself. I work. I have nothing to eat because my salary goes towards to pay off the loan. I’m not earning anything, the whole day I work. This is going on, this is a practice.

This is slavery. This happens here in India today. I will take you with me and show you. Not far from here there is a village. I went to build a building near there last month. I can bring you to people who are in this slavery so you can talk to them. Do you want to write a paper on it? I can show you. This is another facet of dowry system. These are unimaginable things that happen. This is a normal phenomenon. This is the social evil.

In this description of the ways in which debt can entrap the poor, Hussain addressed ‘another facet’ of the dowry system. Here, dowry relates not only to gender roles and acquiring an education or professional status, but it is one mechanism of debt through which other debts come into being or are potentially paid off. Dowry affects girls’ education and the gender roles of both young men
and women, but it is also closely linked to imperiling systems of credit and debt. The more one needs credit (to borrow the money to be paid in dowry), the more vulnerable one is to predatory moneylending, and to becoming trapped in self-perpetuating cycles of debt. Hussain explicates the connections between the prosaic economic culture of the domestic sphere with a most extreme form of economic exploitation, debt slavery.\textsuperscript{146}

In presenting this description to me, Hussain said that this is what ‘nobody’ would tell me, although it is part of the social reality that he could tell me about, that he wanted to show me. He kept asserting that he would take me and introduce me to such people so that I could meet them for myself, people who live in such situations, at the limits of surviving poverty. As it turned out, Hussain ended up working on an extensive building project in coastal Andhra Pradesh, so we never had the chance to make that trip during the remainder of my field research.

In the formal zakat discourse of the Trust, this deeper analysis of the choices people can be forced to make is not acknowledged. Dowry is deplored more for the way it ramifies regressive gender roles than for its danger as an imperiling mechanism of debt. In our conversation, however, Hussain assumed the voice of a man whose entire family suffers because of dowry and debt because he wanted me to hear how profoundly difficult circumstances can constrain the

\textsuperscript{146} On contemporary debt slavery in India, see Kevin Bales, \textit{Understanding Global Slavery: A Reader} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Bales notes, significantly, that “collateral debt bondage – the complete control of any person because of any debt - is specifically outlawed in India,” but like much of India’s progressive legal code, this law remains relatively unknown and often un-enforced. (Bales 4).
choices people make. In telling this story from the first-person, Hussain expresses a level of sympathy and understanding that contrasts with the frustration Najmah communicated after her exchange with the student whose family gave dowry. Whereas she wanted to ‘shake’ the student who’s family borrowed money from a moneylender, Hussain wanted to temporarily inhabit that position, even in an imaginal way. In relating this scenario, Hussain conveyed his empathy with the difficulties faced by the father, but rather than holding the father figure individually responsible, he teases out the interlocking cycles of debt which can cumulatively ambush a person or an entire family. Whereas the oath lays out two crucial actions that an individual can take, Hussain’s words here focus on the ways in which gendered cultural expectations on the family interlock with endemic poverty across the society. His final words establish that while the practice of dowry may be understandable when seen from within this field of limited choices, it risks becoming an instrument of extreme oppression precisely because it can be a point of entry into what becomes inescapable debt. When such ‘unimaginable things’ become ‘normal,’ this is what Hussain calls evil.

Hussain returned to his question ‘But, what to do?’ in the subsequent part of our conversation. He explained his thinking about zakat, and the symbolic transgression the Trust enacts through its oath:

This is how I am connected to myself, to my religion, spiritually, by putting myself in that situation. We are all connected to the Creator by the person we are, by the thoughts we have in our minds. There is no thing more powerful than thought. I think of what I can do and I have to try.
Hussain’s words powerfully frame the act of imagining the experience of another’s suffering as a simultaneous connection to both the self and the divine. In his understanding, all people are connected to God ‘by the person’ that they are and ‘by the thoughts’ in their mind, and this connection makes the creative imagination so powerful. Hussain is aware of how acute poverty compels the practice of dowry, yet even so he believes that he must think about what is possible and claims that he must ‘try.’

This is the language of experimentation, not confidence, and it discloses how the Trust’s practice of zakat becomes a practical theodicy. Recipients of zakat may still practice dowry, either by choice, family pressure, or force of circumstance. They may be ensnared by some form of social evil, that which ultimately captures people in recurring debt, immiseration, and increasing desperation. Note that in Hussain’s words, he makes claims about how people are connected to the divine while he also specifically names the interlocking constraints of poverty as ‘the social evil.’ He doesn’t attempt to understand evil in theological terms, but places it in the realm of the social. In confronting this social evil, zakat takes the place of a theodicy by signifying the possibility of negating this reality, and begins with sympathizing with the situation of those who suffer being on ‘that side.’ As an experimental practice, zakat enables the Trust to respond to evil by setting limits, even symbolic ones, about what should be acceptable in this world. This theodicy is not established theologically, but worked out practically, in the experiments of zakat donors to redress social suffering.

Through such interventions, zakat becomes for the donors a world-making practice. Ultimately, the donors hope that the brief encounter they have with students will enable them to remake their own worlds. Every world-making practice also stands, to
some extent, as a world-foreclosing practice. Donors hope that this zakat practice will proscribe the social practices linked to immiseration. Given that the Trust’s practice of zakat is still new and experimental, it has not yet been evaluated in terms of its economic success or failure – whether this zakat practice does indeed help the poor become non-poor, or middle class. As a practical theodicy, however, zakat provides donors with a sense of personal and social integrity, and an experience they describe with language of transcendence. For recipients, it provides recognition of their ethical capacity as Muslims and material support of their personal achievement. To receive zakat implicates the students into a religious project that affirms that who they are is more than their poverty, and that the choices they make regarding their personal actions can transform the world into a less evil place.

In the study of religion, we know that symbolic systems, including ritual practices like zakat, are expressed uniquely in particular cultural contexts. These unique interpretive practices are interesting to us because of the desires and fears that are realized therein. The Zakat Trust uses religious charity as a strategy for social development. They want young men and women to take the responsibility to resist dowry, pursue an education, and be gainfully employed professionals – to become, in effect ‘good Muslims’ like their patrons, the elite donors of the trust. It is important here to remember that the Trust emerged in the wake of communal riots. This shadow of violence, the possibility of harm and injury, and the memory of tremendous pain and fear that people experienced, remains suspended behind the work of the Trust, animating its volunteers and programs. If they promote a professional, even bourgeois ethos, they do so because they want to seek out some form of sociality that will protect people from
violence and they locate that protection in the promise of being middle-class. They do not want poorer Muslims to be vulnerable to social violence – either as victims or perpetrators – and they believe that the security and comforts of middle-class life make such violence less likely. Ultimately, they want to create a shared world and a shared nation, so that Muslims can live as citizens of India – a middle-class, developed, stable, and composite India.

When poverty goes unchecked, it propels those suffering it into a future constricted by extreme vulnerability and threatened by patterns of entrenched oppression. Turning away from the inevitability of this future towards a different horizon, the Zakat Trust donors have found that redressing poverty fosters an experimental approach in which they embrace the rubric of zakat as a socially-recognized practice through which to try out different strategies. Zakat is a religious obligation that becomes for them a moral mandate for social experimentation regarding collective suffering and well-being. Donors understand that their efforts may be imperfect – either in terms of their reinterpretation of the religious traditions of charity in Islam, or in terms of the limits of zakat to counter endemic economic oppression and gender discrimination – but they are committed to seeking a path through suffering. As their logo, the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust chose the simple and evocative phrase ‘Learn. To Live.’ Beyond encouraging scholarship recipients, perhaps the logo also describes the donors themselves.
Zakat and the Arts of Life

The Zakat Trust uses religious charity in promoting educational achievement and ethical action, thereby connecting ritual practice and social development. For the donors who volunteer to make the scholarship program happen, being involved with the work of the Trust has occasioned new kinds of social experiences, which they then describe with theological language. When they reflect on their experience of practicing zakat, donors emphasize transformative human encounters, more than traditional Islamic views of zakat as sacrifice or the purification of wealth.\textsuperscript{147} This theological reflection on the personal significance of involvement in the Zakat Trust constitutes one religious dimension of social development. The other religious dimension of the Trust’s work involves socio-cultural reform and the cultivation of Muslim ethics— including gender equality—in the collective life of the family and the public sphere. Social development animates transformations on both the personal level and the interpersonal level, such that these dual dimensions become linked in their mutual reinforcement. In reformulating religious charity, the Trust emphasizes the experiential nature of the connections between self and other, and self and society, through the practice of zakat.

In terms of socio-cultural reform, the Trust has shaped the ritual distribution of zakat into an ethical pedagogy, based on their belief that Islam can inspire people to engage in new modes of ethical behavior. Their articulation of a Muslim ethical subjectivity comes out of a creative refashioning of religious charity, as a response to local incidents of communal conflict and structural violence. The experimental aspect of

\textsuperscript{147} Weiss notes the emphasis in West Africa on the purification of wealth through zakat, while Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan emphasize the element of sacrifice, which demonstrates that the ethos as well as the practice of zakat can vary in different contexts.
the Trust’s social development project can be seen in their shift of focus, from charitable social work to an attempt at more structural change by countering dowry and promoting education. They understand this as continuing their religious duties, responding to God’s ‘pushing and pulling.’

The Zakat Trust and other social development efforts can be seen as ‘world-making’ projects, yet the worlds that they are trying to make are not fixed – meaning, the strategies and visions change and evolve as they reassess their efforts, and the process of world-making is ongoing. As those involved with the Trust pursue what they consider to be an inspired course of action, they find themselves in surprising encounters – serendipitous moments of realization and insight. The social experience of ethical reform becomes, then, an experimental social field for those involved with the Trust, as they come into contact with the suffering of others and new understandings of themselves. The experimental nature of social development results from its practical aspects, in the course of day-to-day implementation.

Both of the dual religious dimensions of social development projects like the Zakat Trust are, then, experimental. In the field of collective family life, and economic and gender relations in society, the Trust experiments with different ways of developing society. They creatively interpret rituals and theological ethics in their provisional attempts to redress suffering. In terms of the personal dimension, the volunteers of the Trust face new kinds of social experiences and unexpected encounters. As they internalize these encounters through theological narratives, they emphasize their gratitude for their own security and comforts, and for their capacity for insight into the lived
conditions of others who have less. For volunteers, these social experiences testify to
divine power and mercy.

When the Trust disburses zakat, it reframes charitable donation as a pedagogical
opportunity. Through the use of a religion test, which emphasizes the moral value of
knowledge, and the use of an oath, the Trust shapes the gift of a scholarship into a socio-
religious pedagogy so that recipients can learn the skills needed to persevere towards the
future of their own personal development and for the development of their community.
They guide the students to recognize gender equality, to refuse dowry, and to commit
their future contributions to social wellbeing. They are, in effect, asking the students to
become experimenters themselves, engaging in religious and cultural critique and new
forms of ethical action, and imagining collective life beyond suffering and structural
deprivation. These skills are the arts of life embraced in the Trust’s vision of self and
society, and in its vision of Islam.148 By arts of life, I mean the actions and attitudes that
push against behavioral despair and affirm the possibility of limiting suffering.

For donor-volunteers, the Trust’s practice of zakat also promotes arts of life.
Donors learn how to redress the suffering of poverty and gender inequality, to evaluate
efforts and respond to divine guidance, to recognize the distribution of suffering and
security in social space, to encourage collective responsibility, and to demarcate a moral

148 The notion of the arts of life draws on Foucault’s use of “arts of existence” to describe
technologies of the self as “those reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set
themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their
singular being, and to make of their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and
meets certain stylistic criteria.” Michel Foucault, The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality:
sense used here involves a notion of self grounded in collective social life, in contrast to the more
individual focus of Foucault’s original concept.
field for practical action. While donors determine the pedagogical direction of the project, they also, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, learn new skills. The arts donors and recipients imbibe can be seen as unique to each group, and perhaps this comes from, or even ramifies, the differences between the two groups in terms of age, status, class, and education. Yet they are connected in the understanding that social development comes when the arts of life are learned broadly across society, when many have internalized the skills needed to sustain human wellbeing. The different arts of life learned by donors and recipients in this zakat project are also connected insofar as they are broadly sanctioned by Islamic values.

As the Zakat Trust engages in socio-cultural critique and reform, they draw on religious discourse to communicate new practices and to give them moral weight. The Trust’s use of zakat to counter dowry and to promote the commitment to transform structural poverty draws upon not only the ritual power of charity, but also draws on religious language to inculcate the need for social reform and personal responsibility. In terms of dowry critique, the Trust emphasizes the protection of women’s rights – their claim to and control of mahr as personal property – contrasting this protection with the current cultural practice of dowry and its role in cycles of immiseration and vulnerability. Yet, as previously stated, the Trust places the most emphasis on the Qur’anic assertion of the equality of women and men in their distinct social roles and shared social responsibility. In addition to making their vision of social development communicable, drawing on religious discourse integrates these practical changes into a moral field, making them morally desirable, and even making Islam itself
morally desirable by establishing its relevance to the practical redress of suffering and structural injustice.

When donors volunteer to organize and administer the scholarship program, they narrate their experience of going out into the districts to interview recipients in terms of a new awareness and use theological language to convey this personal transformation. This is interesting because to a large extent the donors encounter exactly what they expect: the students they interview have already been ‘screened’ by a district representative and are therefore identifiably poor (and ‘deserving,’ insofar as they have maintained basic standards of achievement in their studies). Yet in the course of actual contact with these students, donors like Hussain and Ahmed mention having their ‘breath taken away’ and ‘feeling so much’. In these narratives, experience exceeds expectation, for even the imagination of the encounter does not diminish the sense of unintended ‘boons of understanding.’

It could be that in the course of these encounters, what donors experience is the falling away or passing through of dispositions that construct the experience of social reality. They are, after all, experimenting with traversing social space.

Interestingly, the religious vocabulary donors use in describing their experience of volunteering is distinct from that used in the Trust’s more explicitly pedagogical efforts. Whereas socio-cultural reform is communicated through Qur’anic citations and formal categories of Islamic law, the donors often use theological language which articulates God’s transcendence, such as power and grace, when talking about their involvement.

This transcendent language aptly expresses their experience of a more prosaic social transcendence. The experience of traversing social space – of ‘transcending’ the dispositions that shape social distance – to encounter the suffering of others, provides a new, experiential understanding which infuses donors’ use of theological language and becomes a reference for their sense of the Divine. The theological categories of God’s mercy and power are not new and do not change, yet donors inflect these traditional categories in light of the possibilities of social experience in the transformation of poverty.

Perhaps the Trust’s creative practice of zakat, which experiments with ways to significantly shift the structures of poverty, still retains the classical Islamic theology of zakat as a practice of ‘purification.’ Their efforts can be described as a kind of purification not of personally-held wealth, but of the everyday economic and gender choices people make that can either increase or diminish wellbeing. In a way, the Trust takes the fundamentally transformative function of zakat and shift its purification from wealth to society, while holding on to the traditional Islamic duty of charity and the ethical value of caring for others.

While many Muslim social development projects agree that a commitment to human wellbeing forms the core of Islamic teachings, this commitment informs widely diverse practices. For the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust, the practice of zakat functions as a point of entry into experiments in changing the gendered structures of poverty. Yet other projects may have different points of entry, based on their own interpretations of Islam and their own sense about what human wellbeing means.
The following two chapters explore two other Muslim social development projects in Hyderabad, each with different interpretations of how Islamic traditions can contribute to social development and redress poverty. Like the Zakat Trust, these other projects also address notions of gender discrimination as a critical aspect to Muslim social development, yet they each have different interpretations about the ways in which the construction of gender relates to poverty. What all three of these projects do share is a commitment to foster arts of life, the skills which enable people to negotiate social life in such a way as to redress suffering and sustain well-being. Most crucially, all of these projects regard this capacity to sustain wellbeing as an expression of Islam.
Chapter 3

Development and Social Harmony:

The Confederation of Voluntary Associations

The next case study examined here is the Confederation of Voluntary Associations, a large ‘umbrella’ nongovernmental organization that works primarily in the Old City of Hyderabad. As a multifaceted organization, COVA locates its work within the field of development and in doing so, seeks to cultivate a religious subjectivity to counter violence and encourage the integration of Muslims into the broader fabric of Indian society. The first two sections of this chapter, Development Through Communal Harmony and the Social Integration of Muslims, describe the genesis and activities of COVA focusing on their unique position and goals within the field of development in India. The next three sections examine the invocation of religion in COVA’s projects, which is followed by two sections analyzing the distinct gender strategies that intersect with religion and social development as COVA confronts endemic urban poverty. The final section of the chapter describes the ways in which religion becomes elaborated in public space, and pushes the theories of religion to recognize the production of religious meaning beyond institutions, texts, and sacred space.
Development Through Communal Harmony

Like the Zakat Trust, COVA emerged in the wake of riots that ravaged Hyderabad’s Old City after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, when local citizens made ad-hoc arrangements to provide humanitarian assistance the victims. Unlike the Trust, however, the small group of people who founded COVA made a conscious decision to institute their efforts in the Old City as a development organization rather than a charity. Today, COVA is a large, nongovernmental organization (NGO) that functions as an overall umbrella network for several voluntary organizations (VOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs). The founders wanted to form a broad organizational network that would provide the resources to support the emergence of local organizations in the Old City, with the intention that episodic humanitarian assistance to riot victims could give way to a sustained process of local development. Since its inception in providing emergency relief, COVA has defined its work of promoting development in terms of ensuring communal harmony, joining the improvement of material conditions to the simultaneous support of stable relations between different religious communities. Development and communal harmony are two mutually reinforcing goals which comprise a necessarily unified telos: poverty alleviation depends on transforming the destruction of violence, while transforming violence without addressing poverty only serves to sanction the suffering of endemic deprivation. In its organizational literature, COVA describes their mission as “communal harmony, peace, and social justice through sensitization of all sections of society and empowerment of the
marginalized and poor.”\textsuperscript{150} In their view, development and communal harmony can only be realized jointly, mutually strengthening each other and thereby protecting the Old City from further episodes of violence and entrenched poverty.

Like many other NGOs in India and across the global South, COVA undertakes a wide variety of programs in its attempt to make their vision a reality. Because COVA is both an NGO and an association of member CBOs, its “activities are manifold,”\textsuperscript{151} encompassing sustained activities, occasional events, and episodic interventions. Many of their programs are ‘localized,’ meaning they target people living in the Old City of Hyderabad. Local programs tend to implement regular activities, which take place on a daily or weekly basis. Other programs involve state or regional networks, which hold meetings and activities several times per year and are facilitated by COVA staff people.

In addition to ongoing programs at the local, state, and regional level, COVA also carries out occasional cultural programs to celebrate religious festivals. Finally, COVA also takes on research projects related to documenting poverty and violence in Muslim localities of the Old City. Using diverse strategies to approach multiple constituencies, COVA hopes to increase the possible fields of action both in terms of scale, which includes the local and the national, and in terms of modality, encompassing the cultural, the economic and the political.

COVA structures their local efforts in the Old City around the four primary groups of children, youth, women, and community rights. A coordinator manages each

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{150} COVA, \textit{Annual Report}, 2004.
  \item \textsuperscript{151} COVA, \textit{Annual Report}, 1999.
\end{itemize}
project area and provides supervision to other staff members. Children’s programs focus on supporting primary education, both for students enrolled in school and those children who have left school to engage in wage labor to supplement their families’ incomes. \(^{152}\)

Youth programs promote vocational training and social awareness, and have a special focus on planning local celebrations of religious holidays and festivals such as Sankranti, Christmas, and Eid-ul-Fitr. Youth are also involved in running cross-communal supplementary programs in primary schools called “Play for Peace,” in order “to get children of the two communities, i.e. Hindus and Muslims, to understand each other and reinstate the relations between them that were badly affected during the riots on the anniversary of the Babri Masjid demonstration.” \(^{153}\) Efforts related to women are grouped together as the Economic Empowerment Program, which includes both a microcredit project and a handicraft entrepreneurship project. I will address the role of gender in COVA’s work in subsequent sections of this chapter, yet it is important to note that their approach to women in development focuses on the empowerment of women economically rather than socially, and emphasizes material gains rather than ideological ones.

Part of COVA’s mission includes “engaging communities in accessing basic rights,” so alongside programs focusing on children, youth, and women, the organization

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\(^{152}\) Given the prevalence of child labor in the Old City and other parts of India, many children’s rights advocates focus on the illegality of child labor. While COVA also supports campaigns to end child labor, they still support Open Schools, which enable children who are working (or have been pulled out of school for other reasons, including financial constraints) to follow the government primary school curriculum and potentially re-enter formal schooling. For an overview of the child rights paradigm, see the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>.

supports the “empowerment” of local citizens.\textsuperscript{154} Beginning in 2004, COVA staff people began holding general meetings in localities in response to ongoing concerns voiced by participants from different parts of the Old City. The issues most frequently presented in Old City localities revolved around “a sense of social insecurity and acute lack of access to basic amenities.”\textsuperscript{155} In response, COVA held meetings in different localities and worked with participants to formulate “The People’s Manifesto,” a charter of demands of citizens in the Old City.\textsuperscript{156} In the course of creating the manifesto, COVA volunteers formed PUCAAR – the People’s Union for Civic Action and Rights.\textsuperscript{157} Through PUCAAR, COVA staff have held voter awareness programs and facilitated meetings between candidates standing for local elections and community groups in order to help “all political parties take cognizance of the absolute lack of development” of the Old City slum areas.\textsuperscript{158} In addition to advocacy during elections, PUCAAR assists citizens in the Old City in navigating local government bureaucracies in their pursuit of basic amenities. In several localities, they have helped citizen’s groups approach the municipal government regarding power and water supply and waste removal.\textsuperscript{159} One of the most frequent issues addressed by PUCAAR staff is helping slum dwellers obtain a ration card which then allows them to buy essential items – rice, lentils, kerosene, soap – at

\textsuperscript{154} COVA, General brochure, n.d..
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{156} COVA published the People’s Manifesto in Urdu, Telugu, Hindi, and English, reflecting the diverse linguistic groups living in the Old City.
\textsuperscript{157} Although PUCAAR is an acronym comprised by English words, the word pukar is a noun in Urdu and Hindi meaning: a calling out, a cry or shout, a call (to action), invocation, petition, agitation. Platts, \textit{Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English.} (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).
\textsuperscript{158} COVA, \textit{Annual Report,} 20004, 15.
government-subsidized shops as part of the national Public Distribution System, the national program created to support food security in postcolonial India. Whereas the other local programs empower children, youth, and women by supporting their efforts to better their own circumstances and opportunities, the community rights program frames the material conditions of the Old City slums as political, thereby making circumstances of poverty publicly and collectively actionable.

Cross-fertilization across COVA’s various local programs is frequent and encouraged. Women who participate in economic self-help groups may also send their children to one of the Open Schools coordinated by COVA. Volunteers with one of the Children’s Programs may organize an information session on the rights of girl children with members of the microcredit program. PUCAAR often draws on ‘link volunteers,’ key organizers in a locality who are involved with multiple issues from access to water to child immunization. Several craft production centers might join together to sponsor a doctor to come and offer eye check-ups. This cross-fertilization facilitates the integration of different social groups with different social issues, thereby broadening the understanding of ‘social integration’ beyond different identity or status groups. It encourages the perception of the social field as a complex entity, such that these activities create a sense of “unity on the disjointed and ephemeral character of individual experiences.” Further, cross-fertilization links diverse needs and indicators of wellbeing by demonstrating the possibility of their mutual fulfillment and realization.

\[160\] Asad 54.
In addition to the programs targeting the Old City, COVA works to broaden their efforts through building networks and through research and documentation. The District Network Program aims to “establish and strengthen networks of Muslim and non-Muslim organizations to work across community and caste lines to ensure social empowerment, communal harmony, and national integration.” COVA facilitates meetings between community-based organizations and NGOs in nine districts of Andhra Pradesh so they can explore how best to promote self-help groups, self-employment, youth programs, cross-communal summer camps, and thrift and credit programs for Muslim women. COVA chose the nine districts based on their large Muslim populations. The networks also teach nascent organizations how to work with local government to mobilize financial and human resources for social development. Beginning in 2004, COVA invited Muslim religious institutions, such as madrasas and orphanages, to join the district networks in addition to Muslim-headed NGOs. They intend to reach out to Hindu, Christian, and Dalit organizations in the future. Since 2002, COVA has also helped in forming similar networks in four other states in India: West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Gujarat – all states with historically large Muslim populations. These networks, operating at a regional level, add another layer to COVA’s commitment to social integration: as networks interact with other networks across different cultural-geographical areas, social integration at the local level builds into national integration. These network structures allow COVA’s dual approach to development and communal harmony to be translated into other local contexts and then expanded to the national level.

While these local programs and regional networks comprise the bulk of organizational activities, COVA also maintains a research unit that takes on original projects. COVA’s research projects demonstrate an on-going concern with documenting the effects of violence and the sense of marginalization of Muslims at the local, state, and national level, along with understanding the social ethics of Muslim communities. They have contributed to an international study on philanthropic practices of Muslim communities. Additional projects investigated strategies used by individuals and groups to contain communal violence during riots in Hyderabad. COVA also authored an extensive study on the socio-economic conditions of Muslims in Andhra Pradesh. These reports and publications construct knowledge about the experiences of Muslims in the region, particularly regarding issues of communal tension, isolation, and the containment of violence. By chronicling the ways in which Muslims take on roles as peacemakers in confronting threats of violence, COVA documents a kind of nonviolent Muslim social action that is denied by dominant national and global Islamophobic discourses that purport an intrinsic link between Islam and destructive violence. Other research projects taking up the themes of violence and communalism include an investigation of communal riots in Hyderabad on Dec. 6, 2003 (the anniversary of the destruction of the Babri Masjid) as part of a fact-finding inquiry, and the publishing of a book profiling 20 victims of local communal riots. These research efforts call attention to contemporary social conditions and the effects of violence, assembling and inscribing Muslim experiences into the public record in order to fill in the collective knowledge gap that COVA believes exacerbates the marginalization of Muslims in India.
Service delivery, advocacy, capacity building, cultural events, and research form the main types of organizational activities for COVA. This typology of programs is not unusual for many NGOs across India. Like other development projects, COVA structures its programs and interventions around identified target groups, such as children, youth, and women. They work on diverse issues through a variety of strategies – forming self-help groups, handicraft production units, literacy courses, vocational trainings, and public health campaigns. Given a context in which resources from the Indian state are quite limited and socio-economic needs are considerable, COVA experiments in development by channeling its resources into multiple activities for multiple constituencies. In this regard, they are no different from the many thousands of organizations across India working in the field of development. What makes COVA unique is how they combine these development interventions with a commitment to promoting communal harmony, and to integrating Muslim communities into cross-communal and mainstream development activities. This focus sets COVA apart from other NGOs. They maintain the unique position that development, writ broadly, cannot be separated from communal harmony and the social integration of diverse religious communities. By creating a new paradigm to encompass this dual focus, COVA hopes to serve as a nexus that can bring development and communal harmony into a newly synthesized and mutually beneficial configuration.
Muslims and Social Integration

The genesis of COVA is, in many respects, similar to the Zakat Trust in that both projects began in the wake of communal riots – an experience that shaped their understanding of the fundamental link between poverty and the vulnerability to violence. Yet these two organizations maintain distinct positions when it comes to questions of religion and poverty. Whereas the Zakat Trust draws on Islamic ritual practices to create a new function for charity, COVA is an NGO operating in the public – therefore, in India, the ‘secular’ – sphere. It distances itself from directly addressing certain religious issues, such as the status of Islamic personal law in India, the appropriateness of ritual practices, and questions of scriptural interpretation. Reservations about confronting religious issues, particularly those that are embedded in contested understandings of religious authority, do not however extend to the religion as a social identity. Compared to the Zakat Trust, which engages in an explicitly religious project by situating its efforts in the ethical field of Islam, COVA focuses on religious identity rather than Islamic practice in terms of its strategies to promote development and ensure communal harmony. This focus on ‘Muslims’ rather than ‘Islam’ enables COVA to identify the target of their interventions while simultaneously bracketing certain questions about religion. Yet even as they circumscribe addressing contested issues of Islamic authority, interpretation, and practice, they consistently position themselves as interpreters of Indian cultural traditions regarding religion. In order to present a transcendent and universal ethos of social integration as part of their poverty alleviation efforts, COVA programs engage
constructions of religion that are rooted in Indian history and therefore link Muslim communities with other religious groups.

The shift from Islamic practice to Muslim religious identity that can be seen in comparing COVA to the Zakat Trust parallels another shift, that from charity to development. The Zakat Trust organizes its cultural critique of poverty and gender around the Islamic ritual of collecting and distributing charity, drawing on the ethical language of Islam to promote education and resistance to dowry. COVA, in contrast, was founded by a small group of Muslims who specifically chose to institute their organization as an NGO and work within the secular field of development. This choice of organizational structure and focus stems in part from their critique of Islamic charities in Muslim communities. As one early annual report claims, the “groups and organizations in the Muslim community” are largely engaged in running religious schools, orphanages, and other charities, but “there are hardly any NGOs or CBOs within or working with the Muslim community.” In this view, the institutions for collective projects in Muslim communities are seen as expressions of cultural values but cannot advance strategic interests or structural change. According to COVA, Muslim charitable groups often gather “donations from within the local community” which are then re-distributed to the same community, such that religious charity ends up effectively “segregating marginalized communities instead of integrating them together.” COVA’s commitment to development redresses their criticisms of the social welfare work of Islamic charitable projects by fostering the possibility of social integration. Crucially, they do not support

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162 COVA 2004.
163 Ibid.
integration for its own sake, but for the purposeful goal of changing the circumstances of the poor. The organization maintains “the main hindrance to development is communal disharmony.”

Charities can address the immediate material needs of the poor for food, shelter, education, and so forth, yet charities which reinforce religious identity run the risk of restraining poor people from forming connections and relationships with poor people from other communities, thereby limiting the possibilities of ‘empowerment’ to which COVA commits itself. On both the ideological level and the practical level, development asserts the potential for change and the need for it in the collective life of the poor. COVA sees itself as occupying a unique position in the Muslim community by creating space – or, in their words, a ‘platform’ – for people to think beyond charity and social welfare by working for broad-based development.

COVA’s commitment to work in the field of development as an NGO marks them as an alternative (and perhaps some might say a complementary one) to religious charity. Their commitments, however, are defined in the dual terms of development and communal harmony. If COVA’s commitment to development arises from a critique of religious charity, then commitment to communal harmony informs their analysis of development. Many “well organized” NGOs in India “work with only one section of the marginalized, not reaching out to others.” By identifying particular groups or communities as the sole targets for intervention, development practices can contribute to alienation between different communities. Programs that target tribal communities, for example, may in fact provide valuable services or helpful interventions, but unless they

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create new kinds of social relationships between tribal people and others, then they necessarily recapitulate patterns of marginalization and isolation. According to COVA’s analysis, development interventions that do not explicitly attend to the process of social integration across communal lines expose communities to latent tendencies towards fragmentation and polarization. In their analysis, structural change requires social integration in order to be sustainable. This approach pushes the definition of development beyond economic factors to include the integration of diverse religious communities across the social field.  

This dual focus on development and social integration spurred the creation of a new initiative, the Inter Community Alliance for National Integration and Development. Begun several years ago, ICANID’s goal is to “establish collaborations between religious groups and NGOs.” COVA notes that most NGOs neglect to involve religious organizations, which are then “being hijacked by a few fringe elements who have a vested interest in creating and spreading the atmosphere of hate and vengeance.” Collaboration between NGOs and religious groups will, it is implied, strengthen the latter to withstand any pressure from ‘fringe elements.’ Such collaboration will also build longstanding partnerships between organizations from different religious communities, which is usually limited to “symbolic interactions” rather than ongoing partnerships. COVA attempts to maneuver through the space between organizational and religious fields in order to create new points of contacts between members of different religious

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166 Escobar 215.
167 COVA, ICANID Concept Paper, n.p., n.d..
168 Ibid.
169 Ibid.
communities, which they hope will endure as relationships and possibly become new social networks. Significantly, these points of contact and potential networks between religious organizations and NGOs mutually contain their particular risks: NGOs link religious organizations to a broader social field which, in COVA’s words, prevents them from being ‘hijacked’ by those who produce ideologies of hate; at the same time, religious organizations offer NGOs a way to approach communities through a culturally-embedded infrastructure which is seen as organically connected to everyday life.

COVA’s strategic goals identify Muslims as the central partners in their work. To achieve their mission of “creating secular platforms in the form of networks for localized needs of harmony and empowerment” that “cut across communities,” COVA specifically identifies Muslims as one of the main constituents in each of their three stated organizational strategies:

- Enable Muslim CBOs in urban and rural areas to work for holistic and integrated development of all marginalized communities.
- Enable Secular, Hindu, Christian, and other community organizations to integrate with the Muslim community and work for the development of all.
- Form comprehensive networks of all such organizations from different religions and communities to promote solidarity and better enable them to jointly undertake programs and access resources to promote better integration between Muslim and other communities.

These strategies emphasize the category of ‘Muslim’ (mentioned in each strategy) over other categories of religious identity (which are only specified once), along with a repeated stress on ‘integration.’ This language of religious identity and social integration

171 Ibid.
sets out the two poles between which COVA situates its work in social development. They approach member organizations and the individuals who work therein in terms of their religious identity, while also establishing a shared telos that is signified by the ideal of integration. In practice, this has meant that COVA maintains a “special focus on the Muslim community” while simultaneously building networks across communities to promote broader collective interaction “across community/sectarian lines and for humanity as a whole.”172 They explicitly acknowledge difference in the form of distinct religious identities while promoting harmony. The discourse of communal harmony itself depends on the construction of religion as a social identity: in order for there to be harmony, there needs to be Muslims, Hindus, and members of other religious groups that constitute the component elements of a pleasing consonance. Similarly, the very concept of integration is predicated on the bounded identification of religious difference, as integration signifies a whole that requires parts. Religious identity is, however, not end in and of itself. In COVA’s discourse, it becomes marked as a path to the broader, interconnected and inclusive social field signified by integration.

This focus on the Muslim community places COVA in a somewhat ambiguous position: on the one hand, they are an NGO, like any other, dealing with widespread issues through common practical strategies; on the other hand, because of the composition of their staff and participants, and the communities in which they chose to

work they are seen as a ‘Muslim organization.’\textsuperscript{173} They want to stay in the interstices between religious and secular organizations, and between Muslims and other communities, yet their own identification of Muslims as the primary marginalized community which propels the need for integration has led some to perceive them as partial and not fully ‘secular.’ They see themselves, however, as operating in a middle position from which they can encourage other NGOs to recognize the importance of religious and caste identity so that it can be transcended in development interventions. Perhaps transcended is not the best word: they want to recognize the personal and social significance of religious identity, but they do not want it to interfere with development or harmony.

COVA has adopted a few strategies to manage their public image so that they can continue to work with the Muslim community without appearing partisan, or worse, communal. Their two main strategies involve the use of the secular language of nonviolence and development to describe their work, and the presentation of their internal organizational demographic statistics. As an example of their careful choice of language to describe their projects, one early annual report chronicles their meeting with local Islamic scholars to examine the theological warrant for women’s economic empowerment in the Qur’an. Later reports do not follow up on this engagement, and instead describe various interfaith events as part of “peace initiatives.”\textsuperscript{174} COVA staff members continue to have periodic interactions with Islamic scholars and religious

\textsuperscript{173} COVA’s first external review, conducted in 1999, raised the issue of community perception of COVA as a ‘Muslim organization,’ and COVA’s need to counter this public image if it hoped to continue reaching out to ‘non-Muslims.’

institutions – for instance, regarding curriculum reform for madrasas to include ‘modern’ Subjects – yet these are not recognized as formal organizational projects and take place under the radar, so to speak, without mention in public reports.\textsuperscript{175} Similarly, in 2000, COVA started a very small-scale collection of zakat, which they instituted as the COVA Welfare and Charitable Trust. The first mention of this in a 2002 annual report clearly identified the source of charity as zakat, yet the more recent publications identify it only as a “philanthropic trust,” clarifying that “all religions encourage philanthropic giving.”\textsuperscript{176} Removing explicit mention of zakat, which marked an Islamic practice, and intra-Muslim engagements in favor of the more general descriptive categories of peace and philanthropy provides a discursive opening for COVA to then articulate universal claims about religion, human relationships, and social ethics. This shift of language allows their broad claims about religion and religious practice extend beyond Islam and Muslims in order to be applied to all people.

The second strategy of organizational representation involves documenting the religious affiliation of people involved in the organization. Beginning in 2002-2003, COVA started publishing statistics regarding the religious and gender identity of program participants and staff. Interestingly, these statistics identify participants as ‘Muslim’ and

\textsuperscript{175} For an overview of madrasa curricula and educational reform in India, see Yoginder Sikand, \textit{Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India} (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005).

\textsuperscript{176} COVA, \textit{Annual Report}, 2004, 16. COVA has initiated the process for four welfare trusts in districts with high Muslim populations. One of these trusts has established a kindergarten for children of HIV positive Muslim women. They provide the women – largely abandoned mothers – with vocational training, and hire two of them to run the preschool.
either ‘Other’ or ‘Non-Muslim.’\(^\text{177}\) For example, in 2003, 80% of women entrepreneurs associated with Mahila Sanatkar, the women’s entrepreneurship unit, were Muslim (20% ‘Non-Muslim’), and 100% of the participants in the Adult Literacy classes offered by the Youth Program were Muslim. Today, certain programs still have a largely Muslim participant base (such as the Open Schools, whose students and teachers are exclusively Muslim), while other programs are more mixed (such as the directors of Roshan Vikas, who are 58% Muslim and 42% Others), and still other programs are mostly comprised of ‘Others,’ (such as the career counseling program for final secondary exams, which was only 33% Muslim and 67% Others). These statistics function as a marker of COVA’s own organizational capacity for integration across communities. COVA has also recently started keeping gender statistics on programs (other than the Women’s Economic Empowerment program, which has only women participants) and staff in order to document community involvement. According to reports, COVA’s Governing Body is 50% Muslim, 50% NonMuslim (Hindus, Dalits, Christians, Sikhs), and 50% Male and 50% Female, with similar ratios among staff, although with a slightly higher percentage of Males.\(^\text{178}\)

Two things are worth noting about these organizational statistics: first, they place all Muslims in one category, without separately identifying Sunnis, Twelver Shias, Ismaili Shias, or other sectarian affiliations, even though Muslims on staff include people from all of these communities. Secondly, the statistics by religion and the statistics by gender are tabulated but the statistics of gender by religion are not. Perhaps a more finely

\(^{177}\) COVA is, like many public organizations, the postcolonial inheritor of colonial categories of religious identity discussed in the opening chapter.  
\(^{178}\) COVA 2004.
grained picture is not necessary or ideal, but these categories themselves inform us as to how the organization captures and constructs religious and gender identity of staff and participants. The diversity of Sunnis and Shias is superceded by the more general identifier of ‘Muslim’. Likewise, multiple communities – Hindus, Dalits, Christians, Sikhs – are grouped as ‘Others’ or ‘Non-Muslims.’ All women, regardless of their religious, caste, or ethnic identity, are collectively marked as only gendered. This kind of documentation tells us first that COVA is striving to make its own organizational capacity for integration known and transparent. Secondly, it communicates on what grounds of identity formation their understanding of integration is based: broad dualistic categories of religious and gender identity suffice to mark the coming together of different kinds of people, such that intra-Muslim and intra-gender religious differences are not marked. Each of these pairs of dualistic identities emphasizes a particular aspect of social difference (religion and gender), while also allowing other differences to temporarily recede. This elision implies that the priority is on closing fissures between Muslims and others, and men and women, as crucial steps towards integration.

COVA maintains a focus on Muslim communities and organizations in their efforts to ensure communal harmony and to empower the poor through integrated development, and yet they describe themselves as a secular organization. What does it mean to claim the secular as descriptive of this work? What ways of thinking and acting does such a claim make possible? To some extent, ‘the secular’ stands as a placeholder for COVA’s approach – or rather, the legitimacy of their approach. They do not claim authority on the basis of knowledge or experiences that can be described as ‘religious,’
but rather on their history of providing resources for local collectivities to organize themselves and improve (in a variety of ways) their material circumstances and change their social status. As an organization, COVA has had to build credibility and establish its authority to speak and act in the field of social development through cumulative effort. One way ‘the secular’ functions as a descriptor is to communicate their understanding of the legitimacy of their actions and their commitment to society writ large. This understanding of the secular references participation in the broader public sphere. Secular, then, describes COVA’s sources of authority and legitimacy, as well as their operational field in the public sphere. Talal Asad remarks that notions of ‘the secular’ “require the distinction between private reason and public principle,” and “also demands the placing of the ‘religious’ in the former by the ‘secular.’” Insofar as COVA describes sees itself as working in the public sphere (including the sphere of public reason), it works with the public/private distinction identified by Asad as foundational to secularity.

In the Indian context, understandings of ‘the secular’ carry references to the historical and social construction of religious and ethnic identities. More specifically, ‘the secular’ positions individuals and collectivities in terms of their attitude and practices regarding the possibility of social integration. Often, ‘secular’ describes a judgment of communal violence experienced across the Subcontinent, and the desire to limit the potential for violence. The ‘secular’ is imagined as a space of safety and as an idealized subject position that can contain violence. This sense of the ‘secular’ can be seen in the

179 Asad 8.
concept of ‘communal harmony’ that informs COVA’s development practices, for the
cnell concept affirms the imagination of a multi-religious public while simultaneous rejecting
religious violence. As noted earlier, some have challenged COVA by claiming that their
commitment to working primarily with the Muslim community creates a tension with the
organization’s secular structure. At its best, COVA can draw on this tension to position
itself between different organizational and cultural fields; at its worst, COVA staff
struggle to make their hybrid constituencies understand their unique strategies.

Confronting the question of communal harmony compels COVA to recognize
religious identity as a kind of surface presentation of religion. It also pushes COVA to
take up the question of religion itself, as will be examined in section three. In the course
of addressing communal harmony, the organization problematizes religious bias. This
generates a conception of religion that separates the dangerous from the safe, or ‘good’
religion from ‘bad.’ COVA works with such a conceptualization of religion as it
operates in the public sphere, trying to push certain bounded fields of religion and
development into more permeable and – as they put – ‘integrated’ arrangements.
Throughout their experimental engagement with religion in the public sphere, COVA
limits its own religious discourse to those aspects of religion that can form communal (or
what is often referred to in Anglo-American religious studies as ‘interfaith’) relations,
while studiously circumnavigating intra-religious questions and controversies. Here, we
will see how organizational practices draw on the ambivalence of the secular as a way of

\[180\] cf. Mahmood Mamdani *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: American, the Cold War, and the Roots of
Terror* (Pantheon Books, 2004) who looks at the ideological distinction between ‘good’ Muslims
and ‘bad’ Muslims undergirding US foreign policy (23-62).
marking out territory not only to talk about the significance of religion for social experience, but also to create a shared understanding of what ‘true,’ ‘good,’ and most importantly ‘safe’ religion is. By consciously placing the organization in the under-defined, somewhat ambiguous, intersection between development and religion, COVA staff grant themselves latitude to creatively and selectively engage religion in their efforts to counter violence and poverty.

Invoking Universals: Producing Religion in Social Development

COVA staff and volunteers carry out their diverse day-to-day activities in the development field, and although their work does not explicitly mandate an engagement with religion, staff and volunteers still regularly refer to and draw on religion in both planned and spontaneous ways. From casual commentary on program activities or public events, to conscious articulation, these invocations of religion occur and reoccur, emerging from background to foreground and receding again. Religion in COVA’s work is configured like a net of nodal points, suspended just below the surface level of day-to-day activities. These nodal points provide a support structure, a lattice to bolster ideological commitments and philosophical orientations to communal harmony through development. It is important to understand that most organizational activities do not usually need to engage religion explicitly at all. Yet the assertion in specific moments of what religion is and what it should do provides dynamism to relationships, activities, and projects across the organization. Such repeated explication of religion in an organization that does not have an explicit religious mandate establishes a unique kind of interpretive space, which for COVA involves the elaboration of religion as essential to countering
violence and poverty in support of their alternatives – development and communal harmony. Throughout their work in the everyday world of the slums of Hyderabad, religion is periodically invoked as both essential and universal to human wellbeing. This section focuses on such instances of invocation and elaboration of essentialized views of religion in COVA projects.

COVA describes its mission in terms of communal harmony. The concept of ‘communal harmony’ is unique to – and ubiquitous in – the Subcontinent. It is the most common way that people in India refer to ideal relations between people of different ethnic, religious, and caste groups. While ‘communal harmony’ presents the value of establishing relationships across social differences in a particular society, it reflects unique features of Indian culture and differs from frames of diversity in other contexts, for example the discourse of assimilation that pervades conversation about race and immigration in the United States. Dr. Vithal Rajan, Chairman of COVA’s Board of Governors, explains the operant understanding of communal harmony in the organization:

Nor is the concept of communal harmony merely another version of ‘secularism,’ born in the West after several centuries of very bloody religious wars. This enlightenment notion has become political reality in the West, unfortunately, only at the cost of a critical erosion of spiritual life, replaced by mass hedonistic consumerism. The inner life of the Indian peoples remains profoundly spiritual, however much this may be masked by their struggles to survive the collapse of feudalism and Old World colonialism, and the pressures of New World re-colonization in the garb of a vague ‘globalization.’ To all of this are added the recent dangers of divisive fascism bent on creating violent incidents for narrow short-term political gain. COVA is one with the peoples of India in their calm and peaceful coming together in traditional harmony. Its concept of communal harmony is a very rich concept, involving, necessarily, several other concepts of justice, development, equal treatment, and without cultural or spiritual loss, all of which requires not only dedicated work by civil
society, but also informed people-centered processes of good governance.\textsuperscript{181}

This definition places communal harmony in sharp relief over against several dangers, past and present: colonialism and re-colonization, consumer culture, the manipulation of violence for political gain, and the loss of culture and spirit. Communal harmony is presented here as an enactment which defends against such dangers, while simultaneously, it figures in preserving Indian culture, tradition, and spirit. This explanation understands the positive elements of communal harmony in contrast to experiences of loss and damage that characterize ‘the West.’ Rajan also references threats to communal harmony that are domestic and internal, describing the ‘creation of violent incidents’ in relation to the desire for political power. Rajan draws on contrasts as a way of emphasizing the particular significance of this concept for India in further explanations:

The word ‘harmony’ means different things to different people. Some may confuse its rich Indian traditional meaning with the much colder Western concept of ‘tolerance.’ That is an adversarial concept. What we mean in India, what we have experienced in the past, is ‘cultural enrichment,’ a mutually enlightening fusion of cultures, which humanizes, which for some reason gives fresh spiritual insights, as great sages have noted, such as Kabir, Guru Nanak Singh, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, and the millions of ordinary Indians who for eons have lived together.\textsuperscript{182}

Again, Rajan compares conceptual and historical understandings of India with the West, in order to explicate ‘what we mean’ and ‘what we experience.’ Communal harmony here refers backwards into history, both in terms of exemplary religious

\textsuperscript{181} COVA, Annual Report, 2004, 2.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
figures like the saint-poet Kabir, as well as in terms of long-standing popular cultural practices.\textsuperscript{183} What is interesting to note is that ‘harmony’ is not just reflective (historically and culturally), but productive, continually giving rise to ‘fresh spiritual insights.’ According to Rajan, it is the humanizing potential of these spiritual insights that makes the concept of communal harmony not only good but necessary: it mitigates against dangers of domination, exploitation, and violence, while also continually inscribing ‘the spirit’ into what it means to be human in the Indian context. Note that the organization glosses communal harmony in religious language and categories that have been detached from any one particular religious tradition. Rather than a specific tradition (Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, etc.), it is the aggregation of spiritual insights and sages, along with millions of ordinary Indians, which provides the context of cultural vitality here. Communal harmony is presented here as India’s past and potential future, marrying the extraordinariness of religion with the ordinariness of society. It conceptualizes a specific conjoining of cosmos with culture that is singularly Indian in its origin and effects.

As Rajan notes, COVA’s understanding of communal harmony is “very rich,” and its multiple valences synthesize what could be seen as divergent fields and concerns. Communal harmony maintains a conceptual space for fusing

\textsuperscript{183} Kabir was a 15\textsuperscript{th} century weaver and poet who spoke of “religion without the whole framework of rituals.” (Schimmel 38) Kabir’s criticisms of formal religion, along with his distaste for religious labeling, have resulted in frequent invocations of him as a representative for India’s open and inclusive religious culture. Kabir’s verses are included in the Adi Granth, the scripture of the Sikh tradition.
different kinds of cultural and social efforts. It includes continual ‘spiritual’
awareness, daily practices linked to cultural traditions, prevention of exclusive
ideologies of dominations and violence. The concept of communal harmony holds
culture – what the statement calls the ‘inner life’ and spiritual traditions of Indian
peoples – together with politics – the experience of violence, the desire for equal
treatment, and the struggle to redress past injustices and contemporary pressures.
Some aspects of the concept of communal harmony seem fitting for a large NGO
working in an urban environment, such as discussion of civil society and equal
treatment. The language of ‘spirit,’ however, seems at first to belong more to a
discussion of religion than to a social development project. Yet COVA’s use of
language like ‘inner life’ and ‘spirituality’ does not negate their emphasis on
development and empowerment of the poor, nor does such language stand in
tension with their activities in this regard, as Rajan’s explication of communal
harmony makes clear. Rather, the organization draws on the notion of religion
that is embedded in the concept of communal harmony and makes it the bearer of
hopes for the future and memories from the past. Religion becomes, in this
explication, the continuity of history and desire. In presenting communal harmony
as the evidence of spirit and insight, the organization also presents religion –
albeit in a general and essentialized form – as an ongoing creative force in Indian
society.

The relationship between communal harmony and development in
COVA’s work is one of mutual support and definition: communal harmony
undergirds development because it situates the empowerment of the marginalized within the ‘inner life’ of the spirit. If development cannot bring about communal harmony, then it is not an appropriate project to pursue. Conversely, development provides communal harmony with a trajectory, linking it to a series of accomplishments that better the lives of those who suffer most. Communal harmony without development cannot provide people with the strategies and experiences to counter deprivation and neglect.

Talal Asad reminds us that “the secular and the sacred depend on each other,” and are “closely linked,” which alerts us to pay attention to the ways in which one can be constructed through the other. As a large non-governmental organization, COVA occasionally complicates such dualistic divisions, for they consciously engage the sacred in the public, but a very specific definition of the sacred, one that is understood as a supra-traditional and pan-Indian reality. It is important to note that their unique position as a collective bridge between religion and the public accommodates the recognition of the sacred insofar as it gives shape to Indian culture and subjectivities. The question of religion becomes in part a national question because religion is fundamentally, in their view, connected to social reality. In places like Hyderabad, which have been riven by communal riots, the discourse of nationalism remains one of the primary languages in which people can still speak broadly of collective belonging.

184 Asad 25.
185 Ibid. 22.
Supporting Religious Performances

COVA’s organizational statements reference the distinct religious features of Indian culture and society, and it locates its activities within an ongoing expression of spirit that animates everyday life in India. As noted earlier, the nature of their work does not mandate engagement with religion, but their concern with social integration – communal harmony through development – across religious communities keeps religion proximate. In discursive practices and the domain of performance, COVA staff consistently present religion as both essential and universal to human experience. This humanistic view of religion emerges dialectically through the deconstruction of potential religious (communal) violence, and the multifaceted affirmation of religion as critical to individual and collective wellbeing. I want to look closely at two examples of the episodic invocation of religion in COVA activities in order to illustrate how their organizational structure marks out space for religious interpretation.

The first example concerns the performance of religion in a street theater event by COVA’s youth group. The performance took place in a *pandal*, a temporary ritual structure for displays of devotion during the annual festival of Ganesh, a Hindu deity. A group of volunteers from COVA – all young Muslim men – performed a short, silent piece of street theater in the evening, as people were shopping and milling around,

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186 *Pandals* may include themes and images commonly considered secular, or blend secular and religious images, as the aspect of ‘novelty’ is a value in community estimation. Foulston and Abbott note, for example, the prevalence of movie themed *pandals*, in which deities were positioned around a model *Titanic* or a replica of the Hogwarts castle from the Harry Potter series, or an Apple computer store. Lynn Foulston and Stuart Abbott, *Hindu Goddesses: Beliefs and Practices* (Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2009) 158.
visiting all the different pandals on their way home from work. One Hindu staff person from COVA came with the young troop, in the role of manager. He actually proved to be indispensable when the Hindu patrons of the pandal, two brothers who were owners of a sweets shop, had an argument about whether or not it was acceptable to host the performance. The performance was contested even before it began. A crowd of about 50-60 people gathered on stoops and in doorways, and leaned out of second-story windowsills to watch the show. Some simply stopped in the street, with the evening’s groceries in hand. In the performance, a Muslim, a Christian, and a Hindu (marked by green, white, and orange sashes respectively) each form and shape man – literally, a man, one of the male actors – into what they take to be the ‘true’ devotional posture. [Figures 5, 6, 7] After each has had his turn, they break into a fight, only to be reunited by the legacy of nonviolence, here personified by the spectral figure of Gandhi. [Figure 8] With their sashes unfurled to show the colors of the flag, they are now united behind this figural nonviolence to become the body and the fabric of the Indian nation.
Fig. 5 A 'Muslim,' identifiable by a green sash tied around his waist, about to mould 'man.'
Fig.6 A 'Christian,' marked by a white sash, praying before a crucified figure.
Fig. 7 A ‘Hindu,’ wearing an loosened orange sash around his shoulders, positions the figure of Krishna.
When the play was over, I turned to the man standing next to me on the street, who was about 50 and Muslim, and asked “Well, what did you think?” “That’s how it should be,” he said. “But it’s not. That’s just a dream. A beautiful dream. That’s not our reality.” The members of the COVA youth theater troupe packed up their minimal props, and the people around gradually dispersed, moving on to look at other pandals as they made their way home.

This wordless play was intentionally transparent in its gestures and stark symbolic vocabulary: such silent street theater is specifically crafted to be performed in the Old City slums, where its speechless actions would reach across any barriers of language or literacy. This technique crystallizes COVA’s commitment to communal harmony through
social development. In this performance of religion, each religious community is seen working on the same human body, carving out distinct postures. All religions are portrayed as fundamentally the same – productive projects that work on what is essentially human. In the final act of the performance, the potential of religion to disrupt the social field is contained within a nationalist frame, with Gandhi as symbol of a composite nation. In this closure, the performance of religion and the emergence of meaningful social order conjoin as the nonviolent potential of religion is harnessed to the project of constructive politics. The tension between the actual staging of the performance and its message highlights what is at stake in presenting messages of religion and humanism: COVA staff and volunteers had to overcome the resistance of one of the patrons in order to present this vision of religious diversity in India, in which multi-religious cooperation prevails and pushes the country forward.

The second example of religion in COVA’s work shifts from performance to discourse, forming another case of what I here call nodes in the otherwise secular fabric of everyday development work. This example comes from an advocacy training for community groups in the Old City’s slums. The focus of the training was practical organizing skills: how to get ration cards and water pumps, and how to arrange a meeting with government bureaucrats. There were about forty participants in the training, ranging in ages from youth to the elderly; about half were Muslim and the rest Hindu, Sikhs, Dalits, and Christians. After an initial discussion about major problems in slums, the facilitator, a Muslim staff person named Javed, spontaneously narrated a story to
illustrate power dynamics in society. This explication of power was presented through a reflection on the nature of religion in society. Javed’s story begins with a shipwreck:

There was a shipwreck, and people landed on an island. There were people already there on this island, native people. They excluded the new people, and exploited them. They divided the island in half and said ‘Whatever we say, you do.’ The new people were not happy.

The original people built a compound, a wall around themselves. The new people in the story resist, they protest saying, ‘We are all human, Allah made all of us.’ The original people build a mosque - or a temple, or a church. Told those people they had to do what they were told and that in the next life they could do what they wanted. Allah made it that way, they said. …Same with women, if they allow them into the compound, into the mosque, the temple, the church, they [then] say ‘We are more, you are less.’ They say, ‘We must stay unified,’ but they mean ‘you must be like us.’

Does this story have anything to do with your life? Isn’t all society like this? Call it Allah, Bhagvan, in mosques or temples. This is what happens, no?

Every society has this take on women and considers them to be in a certain place, a low place. It makes me ask myself, Are women devils? Is that what we think? Even when Allah made it so that men and women can be together in a good way.

Allah gave us hearts, minds, feet, hands. All of us. If people can’t think in a good way, well….You have to put your heart aright, and then work together. And we have to remember there are good people, good men, on the other side of the wall, they have just been brainwashed. ‘We can’t do anything, not a thing, nothing, nothing.’ Man keeps repeating this to woman until she finally believes it. But Allah gave us all minds.

After this narration, there was about ten minutes of discussion in which people broke off into small discussion groups of three or four before moving on to the afternoon tea break. The older Muslim woman next to me scooted close and began to tell me that was worried
about coming to the training because she was worried she wouldn’t understand, but she was relieved and pleased that she was following the conversation.

Javed presented a rich, multilayered discourse, and here I want to focus on his efforts to construct a shared understanding of religion. First, religion is described in terms specific to the Islamic tradition (Allah, mosques) but that then gives way to parallel terms from other traditions (Bhagvan, the Sanskrit word for deity, and temple from Hinduism, along with the Christian term church), so that a particular tradition is seen as holding a place that could be occupied by another. The narrative is interrupted to make it clear that Islam and Islamic traditions are one instance through which social reality can be analyzed, but if they are replaced with terms from other traditions, the same analysis will obtain. In this narrative, religion is described first as the institution which amplifies exclusionary practices: the people who build the wall are the same people who try to extend their authority through the mosque, which figures not as a place of worship, but as a site for eschatology to justify submission. Additionally, religion is cast as a patriarchal institution. Javed begins by pointing to the way in which religion can become an epiphenomenon of power, but this discourse of religion then dramatically shifts to a theological register, which is the second movement I want to address.

Javed makes a theological appeal with a reflexive question that challenges the social demonization of women: he says, ‘I ask myself, are women devils?’ By taking this association of women and devils to its illogical extreme, Javed’s question reminds his largely Muslim audience of religious teachings about the nature evil in Islam. To counter
this negative valuation of women, he uses theodicy to reposition the treatment of women within the sphere of constructive human relations, asserting ‘Allah made it so that men and women can be together in a good way.’ Javed’s discourse begins with a critique of the ways in which religion can become a site for the dominant to multiply the effects of their power. It then closes with a theological anthropology that emerges as the ultimate grounds for contesting oppression. ‘Allah gave us hearts, minds, feet, hands.’ These are the universal bestowals that are given, as he says simply, ‘to all of us.’ With these fundamental faculties, humanity has the capacity to redress and rectify whatever goes awry in society - if we ‘put our hearts aright.’ This theological anthropology confers priority and primacy to divinely-given human power over the social field. Individuals, in this view, can stand as a corrective to the possible distortion of human relations in society, and even to the abuses of religion in the name of patriarchy.

These two examples of the episodic invocation of religion in COVA’s work demonstrate a deep concern in the organization for the habitability of social life in the Old City. Both examples proffer a critical assessment of religion, fronting its disruptive and oppressive aspects. Religion is apprehended first through negative critique. They then turn to normative claims of religion. Their constructive interpretations of religion emphasize its function in keeping expectations of trust, mutuality, and responsibility to a common purpose in play. For COVA, religion becomes a hermeneutic in how we imagine what Churchland calls “the structure of social space” and how best to “navigate
one’s way through” it. Because religion is linked with essential human faculties of mind and heart, and because all religions work upon the human subject and the social field in the same way, religion is figured as critical to building moral confidence, coordinating people’s expectations of others, and creating mutual intelligibility. Religion, interpreted in this way, makes people safe. COVA draws on this interpretation of religion to encourage people to act on their concern for others – a crucial component of their efforts to work across diverse religious communities in redressing poverty. If we think of social development projects like COVA as world-making projects, then religion is partly what makes it possible for people to act on and in their world.

COVA’s engagement with religion is both planned, like the street theater performance, and spontaneous, as in Javed’s discourse in the advocacy training for slum organizers, which reflects how religion periodically comes into focus throughout the organization’s projects and activities. The organization does not explicitly take on the responsibility of forming religious subjects, as the Zakat Trust does with its promotion of Islamic ethics among scholarship recipients, and it also does not promote or critique particular acts of worship. Yet it does present essentialized constructions of religion as a universal aspect of humanity in general and Indian culture in particular. In each of these presentations of religion, whether discursive or performative, whether in consciously planned activities or spontaneous elements of programming, the dangers of religion are emphasized and then overcome by the equally religious capacity for human collaboration to bring about collective wellbeing. In discussing the connection between religion and

violence, COVA staff include both direct communal violence (seen in the street theater performance) and structural violence (Javed’s discourse on power). In both instances, the power of nonviolence is presented as a corrective to violence, and the dangers of religion are overcome by religion itself.

These presentations of religion acknowledge what R. Scott Appleby calls “the ambivalence of the sacred,” through which religion can legitimize both violence and nonviolence. Since its inception in responding to victims of violent riots and subsequent efforts to challenge the structural violence of poverty, the organization continually responds to violence, in the past, in the present, and in the potential future. Locating itself in the interstices between mainstream development NGOs and religious communities and institutions, it has taken advantage of a parallel, mirroring ambivalence of the secular to present a universal religious humanism through nodes of discourse and performance in the course of their everyday work. It is significant that COVA locates this religious humanism in the realm of culture, naming it as a unique legacy of meaning and practice for Indians. It does this by claiming that, in fact, it is Indian culture that expresses this fundamental spiritual reality. Such episodic presentations of religion are not frequent enough to jeopardize COVA’s public ‘secular’ role; nor does the organization claim to be shaping religious subjects. If anything, the organization assumes that its participants are already religious practitioners, with diverse affiliations and commitments. But it does take advantage of its role of linking people from different religious communities to present a view of religion that is universal, humanistic,

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constructive, and nonviolent. As a public organization, COVA does not want to supplant other religious institutions or forms of practice, but it does, however, make claims about religious practice and identity that it believes should be incumbent on people from all traditions.

In many respects, it is precisely because they are not an explicitly religious organization that they can engage in this construction of religion. As a development organization operating in the public sphere, they deal with everyday problems of material life and negotiation of power. They are there to assist people in reshaping their lives, confronting the ordinariness of struggle and the longstanding effects of violence. Such sustained activity in the slums of Hyderabad’s Old City is the focus of the organization. The breadth and depth of their program activities allow them to come into contact with many different kinds of people, giving them the occasion to experience themselves as residents, citizens, organizers, advocates, micro-credit savers, small-business owners, artisans, actors, and agents of social change. This work with everyday life in slums makes it possible for COVA to make claims about religion in relationship to society and culture. When they are reconstructing cultural understandings about religion, emphasizing its universal and potentially constructive contributions to society, they can present their claims as already ‘naturalized’ because they are not speaking from the position of a specific kind of religious authority within a religious institution. Instead, they are speaking as Indians and religious people to peers who are assumed to be the same: also Indian, and also religious. The organization’s discourse about religion as a universal feature of humanity comes from a shared context that is not tradition-specific, so they
seemingly have less stake in promoting either orthodoxy or orthopraxy. They can construct religion as simply another mode of understanding the human capacity to bring about wellbeing and social change.

COVA presents religion a universal and essential dimension of humanity that can be apprehended in support of collective wellbeing. This on-going presentation of religion, a linking of nodes to bolster their program activities, does not take the place of tradition-specific practices that form different kinds of religious subjects, Muslim, Hindu, or Christian. It does not replace performing prayers or making offerings or visiting saints’ shrines. But in making claims about religious practice, theology, and the role of religion in society, they are marking out a space for trans-traditional elaboration of religion. The organization constitutes an auxiliary site of religious formation, one that is not bound to a specific tradition – Islam, Hinduism, Christianity – but is in a relationship of mutuality to practitioners of these distinct traditions. It doesn’t aim to become the sole means of forming religious subjects, but it does attempt to inculcate religious humanism by presenting a universal and still uniquely Indian understanding of religion.

In both COVA’s own discourse and in scholarship about India, the notion that the culture is intrinsically and organically spiritual prevails. We saw this in the explanation of communal harmony from one of COVA’s board members, as well as in the discourse of staff member Javed. Even the street theater performance implicitly confirmed this: there was no person working upon the human subject who was not identifiably religious. Cultural critic Ashis Nandy also notes the infusion of religion in Indian society,
identifying it as a resource for social stability and innovation for “a huge majority of the citizens.” Nandy states that “when the chips are down, they resist religious and ethnic violence and, when they fail to resist them, they cope with the consequences of such violence with the help of their traditional, rickety repertoire of ideas and skills derived from experiences of co-survival from everyday morality and everyday religion.” What the construction of religion in a development organization such as COVA shows us is how Indian cultural traditions of everyday religion are being consciously recreated, and even re-situated in contemporary social institutions such as NGOs. Even as COVA makes claims about the nature of religion in India – essentialized claims about spirit and the religious capacities of humanity – and presents them as trans-temporal realities, their own efforts reveal that some aspects of ‘everyday religion’ and practices of co-survival can no longer be taken for granted. They are compelled rather to re-create them anew.

**Religious Humanism and the Space of Nonviolence**

COVA’s construction of religion in pursuit of communal harmony and development can be understood in terms of endemic poverty in the Old City and the local history of riots, but it also needs to be viewed in light of prevailing ideologies of religion and citizenship in India. Since the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s, many organizations affiliated with the movement promoted Hindutva, a concept that identifies Indian culture as having an underlying foundation in Hindu traditions, which should, in

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190 Ibid.
turn form the basis of the modern nation of India.\textsuperscript{191} Proponents of Hindutva, the group of political parties collectively known as the Sangh Parivar, encouraged the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, which in turn led to riots in cities across India, including those in the Old City in Hyderabad. As mentioned earlier, it was the desire to help the victims of these very riots that led to COVA’s founding. One of the most significant effects of Hindutva was to cement the link between India as a nation and Hinduism as a religion. Drawing on the colonial categories of religious identity that established Hinduism as the majority religious tradition of India, Hindutva marginalizes Muslim, Christian, and indigenous traditions as being accidental to the nation.\textsuperscript{192} The nation is understood as having a single essential source, such that “India and Hinduism collapsed into each other.”\textsuperscript{193} Countering Hindutva notions of religion and nation, COVA is one group (among others) who attempt to resituate Indians within an alternative nationalism that is still religiously grounded.

Religion works in COVA’s projects to establish religious humanism rather than religious nationalism. COVA shares with proponents of Hindutva a belief in an intrinsically spiritual basis for Indian culture. Yet rather than attributing this spirituality to Hindu traditions alone – a move which renders Islam and Christianity legacies of external encroachment and invasion – COVA staff present Hinduism as one of multiple religious streams within Indian history. All of the streams are valid, in their view,

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid 1091.
because all religious traditions have the capacity to be a constructive force in a composite society, even as they have also been used in justifying destructive acts.

The construction of religion in COVA, even as episodic nodes, counters the logic of difference that animates Hindutva ideology. Whereas Hindutva draws on the binary categories of majority and minority in establishing religious superiority, COVA reframes religious difference in terms of the choice between violence and nonviolence rather than sectarian identity. This reframing draws a new “temporal, spatial, and social map” of the existing “communal divisions” among Indians. COVA’s presentation of religion claims that no tradition can be determined to be extrinsic to the culture, nor can it be judged as secondary or derivative or inauthentic. This is an important shift for Indian Muslims given that influential Hindu nationalist leaders attribute the presence of Islamic tradition in the country to the domination of Hindus through invasion and conquest. Countering this historical narrative, COVA claims that the roots of India’s common culture are a religious heritage of coexistence that is continually animated by “spiritual insight”. Hinduism is one strand of this, and surely a large one, but not the only one. COVA’s interpretation of Indian history and culture challenges Hindutva privileging of Hindu traditions by drawing on universal notions of religion. This reframes the categories of Muslim and Hindu, shifting the

195 Van der Veer 146.
understanding of their difference from mutual otherness to distinct yet parallel expressions of human religiosity. COVA’s fosters an alternate consciousness of Indian culture through its presentations of religion, which in turn articulate the social value of recognizing the irreducible intersubjectivity of life, the fact that “human existence is relational – a mode of being-in-the-world” that is conditioned by interactions with others.\(^{196}\)

Through its presentations of religion, COVA frames culture as a resource for overcoming violence. They attempt to ensure that the cultural repertoire of Indians includes the possibility of religious action to counter violence and support coexistence. In areas riven by communal violence, COVA focuses on changing what they call the context of approval, the process through which social practices are subject to legitimation or dissuasion, so that “it is determined against all forms of discrimination and in favor of harmony.”\(^{197}\) COVA cites the transformation of social practices such as sati, child marriage, and untouchability as evidence of how a changed context of approval supports emerging understandings of wellbeing. COVA conducts capacity-building training on communal violence and harmony for other NGOs and CBOs in which they identify three contextual domains for affirming communal harmony: the self, the family, and the workplace.\(^{198}\) In each of these domains, actions that expand “the space of experience” are encouraged so that people can more fully grasp the reality of others.\(^{199}\) In the domain of

\(^{196}\) Jackson xiv.

\(^{197}\) COVA, Peace Alliance Partners Training Module I, n.d.

\(^{198}\) Ibid.

the self, COVA encourages “visiting friends from other community [sic] to greet on their festivals,” “making friendship with a person from another community,” and “reading religious books of another religion.”

These strategies recognize the temporal structuring of the sacred, the power of affective bonds, and the possibility of what Ricoeur calls the “refiguration” of lifeworlds through textual encounters. These strategies are scaled up for the family domain, with family visits and friendship, and adds an additional description of the family as a domain of pluralism: one of the possible actions in the family is “discouraging family members, especially children, from talking ill of other communities.” Like the Zakat Trust, COVA defines the family as an ethical domain. It transforms the domestic sphere into the most immediate shared space for protecting communal harmony, making familiar intimacy the source of social connection. Actions to support communal harmony in the domain of work include having “prayer space for all people and not just one community, learning the other’s language, celebrating festivals of all communities, sharing of food, and no religious functions on office premises except joint celebrations.” In each of these domains – self, family, workplace – specific actions can shift the context of approval towards communal harmony and establish what Koselleck calls the “horizon of expectation” for encountering religious others. The nodes of religion presented in COVA’s work enable these actions to be seen in terms enduring expressions of spirit that

200 COVA, PAP Training Modules I.
202 COVA, PAP, Training Module I.
203 Ibid.
204 Koselleck 81.
have defined Indian culture. The navigation of coexistence in social life can then be understood as giving immanent form to a transcendent reality.

**Gender and Empowerment**

Like the Zakat Trust, COVA’s work to alleviate poverty also addresses the dimension of gender, and shapes distinct roles for men and women in promoting development and communal harmony through their projects. Interestingly, the aspect of gender pushes apart the conjoining of development and communal harmony, as women are primarily engaged through the paradigm of development whereas programs focusing on communal harmony are not specifically gendered. This identification of women with development can also be seen in the organization’s religious imaginary, which affirms particular interpretations of Islam that sanction the expansion of Muslim women’s social roles and public activity.

Like many NGOs working in the field of development, COVA maintains that the transformation of poor women’s lives is essential to the transformation of poverty writ large. COVA considers its activities to support the empowerment of Muslim women. Scholar of development Arturo Escobar describes how many development organizations integrate women’s empowerment as a key area of activity and as a target to measure successful programming. Women’s empowerment, Escobar explains, is the attempt to “transform the terms under which women are linked to productive activities in such a
way that the economic, social, and cultural equality of their participation is ensured.\footnote{Escobar 187.}

For an organization supporting the empowerment of those in poverty or living in slums, women’s empowerment stands as one specific instance of a broader commitment to facilitate the process of poor people changing their circumstances. While COVA does organize programs on politics for women, in which candidates for local office attend forums held for women to ask questions and learn about the democratic process, most of the organization’s projects involving women fall under the rubric that they describe as “economic empowerment”, which includes their large microcredit initiative and handicraft entrepreneurship unit. The economic aspect of women’s empowerment is a priority for COVA.

COVA chronicles the empowerment of poor women through the presentation of women’s narratives in organizational literature. Each narrative affirms the paradigmatic experience of empowerment as it is framed in the organization, and presents the woman as overcoming restrictive barriers to her involvement and subsequently making unprecedented decisions to strengthen her new role. Often such narratives are presented as case studies to exemplify patterns of oppression and empowerment. Typical of COVA’s case studies of women’s empowerment is the narrative of Bilquis, presented in one annual report:

Bilquis, a lac bangle artisan, lives in Jugdish Huts, a slum nestling in the shadows of Charminar. She is 45, and a large part of her life has been spent struggling to support her family of 5. Like every other woman in the slum, she toiled all her life with her 3 daughters for a subsistence earning. Her husband, who is by profession a cook, wasted away his meager earnings drinking and gambling. Bilquis lived in a constant state
of tension and fear as her drunken husband repeatedly beat and abused her. She was also hospitalized once with grievous injuries caused by her husband. Even then Bilquis could not think of separating from her husband, as her parents refused to support her.

Bilquis was identified as a link volunteer and put in charge of 20 households in the neighborhood to link them up with the urban health post (UHP). She was given a 4-day orientation on health, thrift and credit, and legal literacy. She was instrumental in starting a thrift and credit group in her basti, which brought women together with the common purpose of saving for future needs.

Regular attendance at COVA meetings helped Bilquis in broadening her vision. She slowly started to take control of her life. She reformed her husband and decided to put her daughters back in school. It was a matter of great pride for Bilquis when her eldest daughter became the first girl in the slum to have passed the secondary school certification board examination.

Soon Bilquis emerged as a basti leader and lobbied with the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad for a proper road and drainage system in her basti. At election time, when the local Member of the Legislative Assembly came asking for votes, she along with other women pressurized him to lay a water pipeline in her basti in exchange for votes.

Bilquis’ narrative begins in the context of economic and marital difficulty and shows how her precarity was both financial and physical. She was then identified, likely by one of COVA’s staff people, and given a specific role of encouraging women to bring themselves and their families to the health clinic supported by the local government. This role expanded into public microcredit organization and also into a new level of decision-making in her family as she re-entered her daughters in school. The final example of her empowerment is a powerful story in itself, narrating how she participates in the democratic process and holds political representatives to account for concrete material improvements in her slum area. The narrative is presented as a double and mutual

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confirmation: of an individual woman’s empowerment to redress poverty and of COVA’s ability to facilitate it.

In the early period of the organization’s history, staff of COVA reported that their “work concerning the liberation of women (at least from poverty) attracted a lot of negative reaction.” The organization’s response was to recognize that “the onus of making people understand the necessity and justice of women’s empowerment lies on us.” As the organization struggled to gain acceptance and support in the community, it justified its interventions in part by claiming that they were in accord with Islamic teachings. “Marital and societal rights of women are clearly spelled out in the Quran and corroborated by the Sunnah. These sets of rights have been described by all scholars as the most progressive and humane. However, practices within the community are such as to deprive the woman reducing her status to a mere chattel.” Here we can see that just as religion writ broadly is invoked across COVA’s programs as a way of shoring up their projects, so too does the focus on women also compel a more focused invocation of religion. Legitimizing women’s empowerment occasions referencing Islam as a guarantor of women’s rights. It is interesting to note that whereas the Zakat Trust focuses on the equal ethical capacity of men and women as created by God, COVA references the Islamic confirmation of women’s rights in marriage and society. These rights are not spelled out in detail. Instead, rights discourse emphasizes collective deprivation and asymmetries of power, in order to indicate the fulfillment of what are now signified as legitimate requirements of human being.

208 Ibid.
The affirmation of Muslim women’s rights in Islam is evident throughout organizational documents, but in addition to discursive interventions, it also shapes practical connections between COVA and local religious authorities. As COVA calls on religious scholars affiliated with Islamic institutions to educate other Muslims about women’s rights, they act to confirm religious authority while simultaneously compelling it towards their own desired goals. In the spring of 2006, a group of seven lawyers, all Gujarati Muslim women, came to Hyderabad to visit COVA with the intent of educating themselves about Muslim women’s rights. They were all handling cases of women who had suffered personal injury and loss in the Gujarat riots in spring 2002, in which more than 2000 were killed and more than 150,000 displaced. In addition to visiting different COVA projects, the organization’s staff made arrangements for the lawyers to have a special meeting with the founder of the large Darul-Uloom madrasa in Hyderabad, Moulana Mohammad Hameeduddin Hussami Aquil (known as Aquil Sahab), so he could educate them about the rights of Muslim women in Islam. By arranging this meeting, the organization confirmed his authority in the matter of religious sanctions for women’s rights. Interestingly, in a parallel series of meetings with Aquil Sahab, COVA staff urged him to initiate reforms to include modern subjects in the curriculum of local madrasas. Both of these efforts show how COVA undertakes shaping religious authority in the local context, compelling support for women’s rights and encouraging new directions for religious education. COVA works to constrain local expressions of Islam by influencing religious authority to legitimize their goals of social integration and development, particularly in the face of patriarchal criticism.
Gender and Peacemaking

COVA’s focus on empowerment frames actions to further the equality of women in society as consonant with Islam. Their relationship with scholars like Aquil Sahab creates an expectation that male religious authorities support changing the circumstances of Muslim women living in poverty. Yet this emphasis on women’s empowerment also contributes to the elision of men from COVA’s broad religious imaginary and its confirmation of Islamic notions of justice. COVA internal reports recognize that their “work with men has been fragile.”\(^{210}\) Part of this “male predicament” relates to the rise of “the majoritarian antipathy” of Hindutva, which tends to “bring Muslims together” and provokes a “militant” counter-reaction in youth.\(^{211}\) Given the politicization and polarization of cross-communal relations, COVA acknowledges that its tendency “to sidestep the Muslim male…could be a survival choice, because any programme with Muslim men could involve a level of competition with local political mafia. Instead, gaining male assent and tacit approval of programmes like children’s education, women’s participation in thrift and credit groups and in public spaces, has been slowly and steadily won.”\(^{212}\) The question of survival collapses the possibilities of transformation and makes the avoidance of conflict with political manipulators into a necessary practical strategy. Yet by failing to address men’s roles directly as a gender issue, the development of men’s

\(^{210}\) COVA, Staff Meeting notes, n.d.
\(^{211}\) Ibid.
\(^{212}\) Ibid. This strategic choice of moving carefully within social constraints of gender is echoed in the case study of another, smaller NGO in Hyderabad presented by Fatima Alikhan, “Women and Education: A Case Study in Hyderabad,” Empowering Women for Development: Experiences from Some Third World Countries, Haleh Afsar and Fatima Alikhan, eds. (Hyderabad: Booklinks, 1997) 103-114.
“gender-based consciousness” is forestalled. As a result, men’s peacemaking and interfaith experiences are never gendered in such a way as to deconstruct male patterns of violence, communalism, and domination.

When women are addressed primarily through the paradigm of empowerment they are viewed primarily as wanting transformation. There is no question that transformation is of utmost importance, given the difficult material conditions of poverty and the profound educational deprivation in many women’s lives across the Old City. The risk is that within this paradigm it can seem that redressing poverty becomes a matter of broadening women’s participation and inclusion but does not require any transformation of men. This communicates that poverty is a problem for women rather than a gender issue that dynamically intersects with patriarchy.

A particularly striking instance of nonviolent peacemaking illustrates this view of gender and empowerment in the organization. In late February 2002, Muslims and Hindus participated in violent communal riots in the Indian state of Gujarat. Thousands of people were killed, injured, and raped. Hundreds of religious buildings were destroyed, mostly mosques and Sufi saints’ shrines. More than 150,000 people – mostly Muslims – were internally displaced and fled to refugee camps. Despite curfews and preventive arrests, violence raged throughout the state for months. Reports from both national and international investigations noted that local police failed to ensure security. Given the pattern of communal violence spreading between urban areas across India, COVA made attempts to prevent the eruption of communal violence in Hyderabad. After calling a

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213 Escobar 188.
meeting with other NGOs, COVA formed local peace groups of Hindu and Muslim citizens to help “local residents be motivated to maintain peace in their localities” throughout the Old City.\textsuperscript{214} COVA then held an “All Faith Prayers for Peace” meeting in which “religious leaders from different religions and communities prayed for peace and exhorted the people to maintain peace and amity.”\textsuperscript{215} The gender of the organizers and participants in the peace group and prayer meeting was not specified.

On a regular basis, male staff and volunteers from COVA patrol the area around the Mecca Masjid during Friday prayer times to prevent altercations. On the Friday after violence erupted in Gujarat, despite the presence of men from COVA who worked to calm communal tensions, some “miscreants” damaged a police station and attacked the homes of some “Hindus who had been living peacefully in a Muslim neighborhood for generations.”\textsuperscript{216} “The terrified Hindu women” of these homes “were given protection by the Muslim women living in their neighborhood.” One week later on International Women’s Day March 9, the Muslim women “were felicitated as Saviours of Hyderabad.”\textsuperscript{217} The next week on March 15, “the whole city was apprehensive about violence breaking out.” In the midst of intensifying apprehension, about 50 women volunteers from COVA, including some who had been recognized the week before, positioned themselves between “angry young men” and the local police they were targeting, forming a human chain to prevent violent conflict.\textsuperscript{218} These “women from the

\textsuperscript{214} COVA, Case Study, n.d.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid.
most disadvantaged background” prevented “what could have been a bloody clash.”

Most of the women from COVA in the human chain were wearing the burqas at the time. After they had been recognized as peacemakers at a special ceremony held by the local government, the organization put a picture of the women on the cover of its next annual report. [Fig.9] Several participants narrated their experience of this nonviolent action to me, and recalled it with pride and excitement.

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219 COVA, Case Study, n.d..
The way this event became integrated into organizational memory as both a narrative and an image emphasizes the empowerment of women. Most of the women involved had never before played a public role in confronting communal violence and described this as an expansion of their power and influence. Interestingly, men from COVA had done exactly what the women did: they too put themselves between groups in order to provide deterrence against violence and maintain a space for coexistence. In fact,
men from COVA did this on a regular, weekly basis. On three separate occasions over the course of doing fieldwork I saw men from COVA return from their weekly riot prevention patrols with injuries from being pelted with stones. But the lack of framing men’s roles and actions in terms of gender means that their activities of peacemaking and interfaith relations are not integrated into prevailing understandings of masculinity or Islam. When the gender of participants in COVA’s programs and activities is not described, there is an implied male normativity. This normative view does not recognize certain actions of men as gendered: men are not called ‘men peacemakers’ and nor is their interfaith activity seen as ‘men’s interfaith relationship building.’ This reflects a binary understanding of gender and violence in which men act violently and women make peace.\textsuperscript{220} Certainly part of what made the human chain action so memorable for both men and women is that the women were acting in public space that is gendered male: in front of the mosque, on a Friday, after men’s congregational prayers, next to the police line. Yet not recognizing the work of men to prevent violence in that same place elides into the taken-for-granted quality of their presence and ramifies male normativity of public space, both in the geographic area of the Old City and in the meetings of interfaith religious leaders. It inhibits the activities of praying together and protecting public space through nonviolence from being seen as a gendered activity for men. With such a lack of explicit gendering, collective devotion and peace-making are not integrated into normative ideals of masculine behaviour.

Gendering certain domains of action and discourse as empowering for women opens the question of what constitutes empowerment for men. In looking at the way

\textsuperscript{220} Caroline Sweetnam, *Gender, Peacebuilding and Reconstruction* (Oxfam, 2005) 2.
categories of gender are operationalized in the organization, we can see that there is a threshold of risk and challenge that is maintained by the choice not to engage constructions of masculinity. This strategic choice affects gender insofar as nonviolence and interfaith peace work are not seen in the organization as gendered performances of masculinity. The gender strategy of focusing on women’s empowerment also affects the local context of Islam. When COVA calls on local Islamic authorities to sanction and legitimize the transformation of women’s public and domestic roles, they actively participate in the continual renewal of Islamic social ethics. They compel the re-articulation of religious affirmations of women’s rights and help shape the (ironically, patriarchal) religious authority of Islamic scholars through their support of justice for women in Islam. There is not a parallel invocation of Islamic religious authority for transforming the public and domestic roles of men, nor the local context of violence. Islamic tradition is invoked in regards to women’s rights but not the issue of violence, which makes it difficult for nonviolent peacemaking of both Muslim women and men to be seen as an expression of Islam.

The strategic choices of an organization like COVA demonstrate the profound complexity of “intersectionality” – “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations.” In confronting complex and simultaneous processes of discrimination, COVA emphasizes particular instances of inequity and suffering over others as they try to identify critical shared intersections through which comes the possibility of change. By strategically bracketing some asymmetries of power while focusing on others, they are trying demarcate social sites

that will prove to be both tractable and expansive. Other issues are in fact recognized but they are not prioritized. Throughout COVA’s programs, certain gender roles and patterns of violence are deconstructed and directly challenged; others are tacitly accepted. COVA does not address the construction of masculinity, either Islamic or Hindu, in the hopes that garnering male support for improving women’s lives will “gradually” open pathways of social connection and change for men. It celebrates women’s nonviolent public action to foster cultural practices of peacemaking, while letting its Counseling Unit handle cases of domestic violence on a case-by-case basis as a private family matter. With religion as well, certain interpretations are compelled and certain practices prescribed, while other aspects of the religious status quo are maintained. In confronting religious controversies, particularly the profound questions about how Islamic ideals relate to the lived reality of gender, and the gendered ways in which Muslims live religion, common commitments can founder: experiences, values, and ideologies of gender are profoundly variegated. They may founder, but COVA wants to make sure they do not entirely dissolve. Focusing on particular intersections of social life heightens the possibility of change even as it temporarily allows others to fade from immediate view.

**Elaborating Islam**

Establishing an auxiliary religious space enables COVA to experiment with the way that religion becomes inflected in the transformation of poverty. Unlike the Zakat Trust, which sees itself as extending the cultivation of ethical Muslim subjects in

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222 COVA internal case study.
contemporary India, COVA does not claim to be forming religious subjects. Nor does it claim to be perpetuating Islamic tradition since it sees itself as a public NGO. Rather, it functions as an auxiliary space for the elaboration of religion writ broadly and Islam in particular. In the course of their everyday development work, religion is not too distant, but neither is it always close. Religion is regularly visited as a crucial matter for critical reflection in light of social stratification and change.

While COVA does not address the legitimacy of specific religious practices, they do constrain religious interpretation and in so doing and assert their own supplementary authority on religious matters. They exert this supplementary authority by participating in two overlapping ‘communities of interpretation.’ First, they take part in constructing shared notions of religion that are rooted in Indian culture. They build a cultural repertoire that makes it possible for Indians to speak across religious communities by presenting an understanding of religion that supersedes sectarian identity. Through these efforts, Indian culture itself is figured as a pluralized religious project. Secondly, the organization locates itself in on-going contested conversations about local practice and interpretation of Islam, selectively pushing and pulling Islamic institutions to collaborate in their efforts to alleviate the suffering of poverty. Rather than thinking about religious authority being solely invested in persons or institutions, projects like COVA demonstrate that religious authority exists in various layers of social relationships. Their participation in both of these religious projects reveals how the explicit formation of

religious subjects can be complemented and refined in experimental spaces of religious elaboration.

The organizational structure of COVA as a public development organization prevents their work from being signified as ‘Islamic.’ They do not want to be a Muslim organization promoting Islam, but rather a place in which Muslims can come together with others in order to improve their wellbeing both collectively and individually. They share with the Zakat Trust this broad goal. Also similar to the Zakat Trust is the way in which the expression of personal religious reflection on their work remains latent. The aversion to fostering a sense of religious ‘mission’ dissuades people from articulating the religious significance of their involvement in COVA, yet many staff related to me that their involvement in the organization was an expression of their religious commitments. This was not true for all staff, as some claimed that for them it was simply a job. But for others, their work to redress the poverty of the Old City by empowering slum dwellers comes out of their understanding of what is means to be Muslim. The assistant director of COVA stated in an interview, “Religious people are never communal, and communal people are never religious. That is what true Islam teaches.” Another male staff member who was raised in the Old City told me, “My father, all my life he raised me to love everyone, but after Gujarat, he changed. He no longer wanted to talk to our Hindu neighbors, to visit them. He became communal. Before I came here, I didn’t know where to go. But here I am Muslim. God for me is mercy and what we do here is mercy, too. This secular space is sacred to me.” COVA does not attempt to capture these kinds of personal reflections. It affords people the latitude to have a very idiosyncratic
understanding of how their work for development and communal harmony relates to their personal devotional practices, whether they are Muslim or Hindu. There is no explicit claim to be forming Muslims, nor consistent expression of personal religious significance, and yet the activities of COVA and the space for people to work together to promote collective wellbeing in the face of social polarization and poverty is, for many, a crucial component of their religion.
In 2004, a small group of women started the Shaheen Center in order to transform the lives of women slum-dwellers struggling with poverty. They chose to locate the Shaheen Center in the Sultan Shahi neighborhood of the Old City, an area that has experienced significant communal violence between Muslims and Hindus. The effects of such violence fall particularly hard upon the women in the area. Not only are many families living below the poverty line, but in addition to personal trauma from the riots, women also bear the weight of the socio-cultural effects of violence. This chapter looks at the Shaheen Center, and examines the unique synthesis of feminism and communal harmony in its social development work. I begin by discussing the physical and social environment of the Center in the Sultan Shahi neighborhood of Hyderabad’s Old City, in order to contextualize Shaheen’s projects in terms of the local history of social fragmentation. I then present an overview of their activities, looking at how the space of the Center supports the formal and nonformal education of women and girls. The third section moves on to look closely at religion in Shaheen’s work, including a consideration of the ways in which founder Jameela Nishat engages Islamic tradition in India, and how the Center becomes a site for feminist contestation of religion. The final section explores the construction of feminist subjectivity in the Center’s as it responds multiple dimensions of poverty in the lives of poor women and girls.
Experiencing community in the space of a local center allows people to encounter the manifold structures of collective life. The specific focus on gender in Shaheen provides a centripetal force for exploring common experiences, while also offering a rationale for learning about the way social forces intersect to shape differences among women. While many poverty alleviation projects focus exclusively on improving economic conditions for women, the Shaheen Center reframes the challenge of poverty in terms of developing women’s understanding of themselves as participants in shaping the social world. As part of this process of building consciousness of gender subordination, Shaheen directly challenges patriarchal religious authority as a cross-communal feminist concern.

The Space of Community

As is the case of the other two Muslim social development projects explored in this dissertation, the Zakat Trust and the Confederation of Voluntary Associations, the Shaheen Center came into being after Hyderabad’s Old City experienced severe communal riots between Muslims and Hindus following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992. Unlike the Zakat Trust, which targets the rural poor in distributing the charitable donations of an urban elite, and COVA, which coordinates activities across several Old City slum areas, the Shaheen Center is rooted in one particular slum neighborhood, Sultan Shahi. It is modeled along the lines of a community center, an organizational form that materializes a commitment to place. The Shaheen Center sits on a small dusty road, tucked far back from the main thoroughfares of the Old
City. Reaching Shaheen involves making a series of densely-paced turns through unmarked neighborhoods and streets. There are mostly walls, interrupted with doors, and the occasional small shop selling milk, eggs, rice, or other rations. There is not much commercial activity in these bastis, localities, beyond small-scale trade in necessities. Occasionally there is an elementary school. Mosques, small temples, and mazars (tomb shrines) are scattered here and there. Even these seem to appear suddenly, as corners are turned, and one small road – pressed in from both sides by walls – torques and gives way to another. In the density of this settlement, it is difficult to find a wide horizon. Few buildings are taller than two stories. There is sky overhead, but there are no vistas.

Sultan Shahi is a one of the sprawling slum settlements of Hyderabad’s Old City. Slum here is both a legal and a geographic category. For the purposes of public policy, the Government of India defines a slum as: a compact settlement of at least 20 households with a collection of poorly built tenements, mostly of temporary nature, crowded together usually with inadequate sanitary and drinking water facilities in unhygienic conditions. According to the most recent reports, there are fewer slums yet with larger numbers of people living in them, so that slums are becoming more dense. There are approximately 42 million slum dwellers in India’s urban areas, a population equal to that of Spain or Columbia. Like other large cities in India, Hyderabad has grown tremendously in the past two decades and now has a population of approximately 9 million. There has been no major upsurge of industrialization or other mechanism of

economic growth contemporaneous with this intense period of urbanization. Yet economic precarity does not make migration less attractive, and a depressed economy does not dissuade people from settling slums. If anything, compounding rural insecurity propels movement into cities. The expansion of slums dissociated from economic growth means that more people are living in areas of cities defined by their immiseration. As urban historian Mike Davis puts it, “Much of the urban world…is rushing backwards to the age of Dickens.” This leaves open questions about social space and how social interaction is reshaped as slums modify cityscapes. Given economic stagnation, what centripetal social forces come into play? And what does this mean for how people cope in day-to-day life? In our inquiries about women and religion broadly, and especially gender and Islam, we risk under-attending emergent social realities without the broader context of this demographic change. Given that more people are living in slums, investigations of lived religion will increasingly explore not only the atmospherics of the city, but the lives of poor women who strategize to make life in them viable. This chapter telescopes into one slum area, looking closely at how a Muslim feminist community project works with local women and girls to promote gender justice and inter-religious relations through their efforts to redress poverty.

The Social Reality of Fragmentation: Violence and Poverty in Sultan Shahi

The possibility and experience of communal violence intimately relates to the way social space is created from geographical territory. The Sultan Shahi neighborhood

was one of the Old City localities that experienced a high degree of violence in the 1992 riots. For more than six months, a public curfew was in effect, as it was across other riot zones in the Old City. There were many direct incidents of violence in Sultan Shahi at the hands of mobs composed of both neighbors and strangers. Hindus harmed Muslims and Muslims harmed Hindus, as both groups intensified the already widespread fear by inflicting physical suffering and psychological trauma. As with most localities of the Old City, the Sultan Shahi slum was settled by groups: Muslims chose to abide close to other Muslims, as did Hindus, Dalits, and other migrants. Neighborhoods are rarely homogenous, but within localities, religio-ethnic groups settled in clusters. Such settlement patterns allowed people to establish social networks and patterns of mutual aid: clustering fostered a sense of belonging to a new place. This pattern contributed to the eruption of violence in the Old City, as groups of homes could be identified as belonging to one community or another. The same clusters of homes that provided support and recognition were, through the contorted lens of aggression, more easily marked as targets.

The neighborhoods of the Old City became reconfigured in the wake of the 1992-93 riots. Riots reshaped housing patterns, as people shifted to be closer to others in their community. In an atmosphere of mistrust and fear, the commonality of religion seemed to provide the slightest measure of reassurance against the possibility of further harm and suffering. Violence spawns social fragmentation, so the riots effectively fortified community boundaries. While the most palpable effects of violence included injury,

227 Several scholars who have studied the effects of communal riots in India have noted the transformation of urban housing patterns in the wake of violence. See, for example, Ghassem-Fachandi.
widespread trauma, and mistrust, one of the most enduring legacies of communal riots has been the erosion of many mixed neighborhoods. The intensification of social insecurity that resulted from physical violence made moving into more homogenous neighborhoods both justifiable and defensible: Muslims moved out of Hindu neighborhoods and vice-versa. The bigger unit of neighborhoods remained mixed, but the localities within them became less so. The blending was not so finely grained as it had been, and resulted in larger groups alongside each other. The map of social demographics in the Old City slums is now less pixelated, we might say, as the discrete units have become that much more like blocks. When fragmentation reshapes the habitation of the built environment, this cements social space as an after-effect of violence. The homes that house bodies also embody a kind of recollected pain, scarring, and trauma. People dwell, literally, in the memory of violence.

The Shaheen Center came into being in part because of the social fragmentation of the Sultan Shahi locality. Episodic violence heightened communal tension and further segregated housing patterns, leaving fewer spaces in which women of diverse religious communities could interact, either spontaneously or intentionally. This feminist view on social fragmentation acknowledges the increasing barriers to building feminist movement when a society becomes polarized. Shaheen’s founders carefully considered the social disaggregation of women when thinking about the spatial possibilities of the center’s location. The Shaheen Center’s location is crucially strategic: it sits right where the border of a Muslim locality, a Hindu locality, and a Dalit locality meet. The deliberate location of the Center in the interstices of a socially disaggregated neighborhood mitigates the fragmenting effects of violence in two subtly different but interrelated,
ways. First, the Center became a site of proximity. Since it borders different communities, it attaches localities. The physical space of the center joins different localities to each other, and spans the discontinuities of community boundaries. The Center draws on the neutrality of its in-between location to establish the possibility of cross-communal social contact. It becomes the site for an alternative sociality that emphasizes the integration of different religious communities. Secondly, it also stands as an alternative to the history of Sultan Shahi, and the way the experience of violence has shaped the habitation of the neighborhood. For those who lived through the riots, personal memories of suffering are attached to physical places of the neighborhood that have been reconfigured into changed localities of religious communities. The Shaheen Center was created several years after the riots. It responds to the fragmenting effects of violence by constructing a space that in its very newness is distinct from the history of the riots. It is not located in the spatial memories of harm and hostility, so it is not viewed as part of the theater of remembrance that saturates the physical environment of Sultan Shahi. Rather than being tethered to past experiences, or defined by its incorporation into historical narratives of place, the Center is oriented towards the future, and the realization of its vision of gender justice.

The Shaheen Center addresses social fragmentation as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, looking at violence not only in terms of communal riots, but also in terms of how it relates to gender in Sultan Shahi. Demographic patterns have shifted

\footnote{On several occasions during my fieldwork, I had women remove their face veils or burqas to show me scars on their bodies from the riots. In narrating their scars, they each mentioned the exact place in which they were injured, pointing if it was close by, or describing the location in relation to known landmarks of the neighborhood.}
towards a communalization of localities, such that external impressions (including mine above) convey an increase of distance, disintegration, and division. This broad description holds true if the factor of religious – or ‘communal’ – identity is isolated. Yet gender complicates this account. Women live in all communities and in all localities, and yet the effects of the riots on women’s lives are not ‘mapped’ in the new constellations of religious communities. Even in the face of polarization and fragmentation, women are seen as being ‘with their own’ since that fragmentation focuses on religion and not on gender. This eliminates the retrieval of their experiences from the public narratives of the riots which emphasize the eruption of violence through the primary lens of Hindu-Muslim relations, and not gender relations.\textsuperscript{229} The violence that has produced a new social reality in Sultan Shahi was gendered, both in its acts and in its effects. Most of the perpetrators of violence in the riots were men, and the fearful possibility of future violence is also imagined as the action of men. In terms of victims, it is important to note that both men and women suffered harm and injury. Yet the ways in which violence coincides with constructions of gender amplifies, and at the same time obscures, the social fragmentation of women’s lives. Shaheen founder Jameela Nishat explains, “Any communal tension results in the oppression of women at two levels: the perpetrator group targets them as victims, while their own community uses oppressive tactics in the name of protection.” The communalization of the habitus post-riots contracts the social sphere in which women encounter other women, especially of different religious, ethnic, and class groups.

\textsuperscript{229} Urvashi Butalia notes a similar elision of gender in accounts of partition in \textit{The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India} (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998).
By creating a space in which women can meet other women, and girls can meet other girls, the Shaheen Center advocates involves women in the kind of cross-communal relationship building that has the potential to prevent future episodes of violence. As Nishat explains, the dual oppressions that emerge from communal tension “cannot be countered without bringing about communal harmony among various religious group by a process which includes women from these diverse communities.” Feminism and communal harmony become inextricably linked in terms of both strategy and programming at Shaheen: bringing women together in order to promote gender justice necessarily involves taking up issues of communal relations, for women come from and sustain different religious communities. Such feminist practices also challenge proponents of communal harmony to acknowledge the ways in which tension and violence disproportionately affect women, intensifying their suffering and oppression.

The Shaheen Center is committed to working with women from different communities as a way of countering the social fragmentation of violence while simultaneously challenging the patriarchal cultural codes that diminish women’s status and public participation. It is important to remember that these broad efforts at social change are deeply rooted in the particularity of place, in the slums of Sultan Shahi. Physical context moulds the projects of the Shaheen Center, and its efforts are measured against the material conditions of the lives of the women and girls in the area. Dense and cramped housing, substandard water and sanitation facilities, lower levels of nutrition, and limited access to healthcare and education are the realities which mark both the area and its inhabitants as poor. Geremek notes that it is only through social context that we can see the “disparate factors – social, cultural, economic, political, psychological,
physiological and ecological” that interact to make poor people poor.\textsuperscript{230} Determinations of poverty may change in diverse chronological, geographical, social, and religious formulations yet poverty is, without fail, gendered. As Martha Nussbaum notes, women everywhere around the world suffer from merely being women.\textsuperscript{231} Among the poor, women are poorer. The Shaheen Center attempts to transform the social context of women in Sultan Shahi by providing space for women of different communities to meet, and by coordinating activities that directly relate to improving the immediate conditions of their shared lives. Such conscious effort to redress social fragmentation not only contains the possibility of communal violence, but also puts women in a new position from which to manage their material circumstances. This means that social and cultural life (including any potential change therein) has to take account of the physical context in which life is embodied and lived, and vice versa. The following section looks at how this dynamic relationship is framed as a feminist project in the daily activities of the Shaheen Center.

\textbf{The Cross-Communal Project of Gender Justice}

As a community-based center for women and girls, Shaheen undertakes a wide variety of activities. This section describes the day-to-day flow of people and events at the center, as well as the organizational vision that shapes the coordination of activities. Beginning with an explication of the Shaheen Center’s mission statement, I then look at the activities, staff and participants from the Sultan Shahi community. This description provides the groundwork for understanding how Shaheen defines feminist practices of

\textsuperscript{230} Geremek 5.
\textsuperscript{231} Nussbaum 1.
community development and the kinds of feminist subjects they seek to create. The organizers of the Shaheen Center strive to create a space which contrasts the social determination of gender by giving women and girls the space to claim aspects of self that are restrained or denied by cultural conventions. Muslim feminist subjectivity, insofar as it is cultivated in the work of the Shaheen Center, entails not just self-definition, but also a sense of satisfaction that results from fulfilling the desire for self-definition.

Like most social development organizations, the Shaheen Center presents its work to the public through the encapsulated form of a ‘vision-mission’ statement. The Center states its mission in terms of two broad inter-related efforts: 1) to promote gender justice and; 2) to create consciousness about the socio-religious and communal oppression of women. Gender justice, as it is defined through the Shaheen Center’s work, includes redressing the injustices suffered by women through domestic violence, polygamy, exclusion from public education, and marginalization in political life. In this sense, the pursuit of gender justice emphasizes the legal aspects of women’s status, along with concomitant issues of institutional inclusion and public recognition. Justice, then, signals the practical redress of historical injustice. Like many practitioners working in ‘grassroots’ social development, those involved with the Shaheen Center support a pragmatic approach to the question of gender justice: it stands as the organizing principle for a cluster of strategic actions rather than a philosophical concept that has been systematically elaborated. The term ‘justice,’ while still subject to debate, compels significant popular assent, so that this justice discourse marks a strategic choice: it is a term that effectively codes feminist politics while circumventing debates about the value and efficacy of feminism as an ideology. Its current use in reference to gender
discrimination captures the desires and critiques about status and social roles implied in discussions of equality, while simultaneously putting greater force behind concrete actions than philosophical or ideological consensus. Gender justice emphasizes practicability and the corrective pressure that can be brought to bear on existing social institutions.

The second aspect of Shaheen’s mission takes up the issue of consciousness, a hallmark concern of contemporary feminism, in order to challenge “the socialization of girls as ‘lesser human beings’.”232 The question of consciousness points to the recognition of the socio-cultural architecture which buttresses the attitudes, values, and assessments through which women and girls are seen as less – lesser than men, and therefore less than human. The Center’s brochures and handouts use terms such as beliefs, ideas, cultural sanctions, and ‘mindset’ to describe the objects of consciousness. Discursively, ‘consciousness’ works to establish a distinction between “traditional beliefs” and the ability “to build new references and ways of living which allow [the young generation] to outgrow outdated and gender-insensitive family/religious practices.”233 Consciousness is linked to notions of historical change and a dynamism that characterizes the continual recreation of society. Practically, it is assumed that consciousness culminates in and is manifested through actions that will “reform the social reality of our community.”234 Consciousness is not mere knowledge as much as it is a special kind of knowledge, one that establishes the conditions of action and volition.

Consciousness moves from recognition of social reality to become the ideation of social

232 Shaheen Women’s Resource Center, brochure, n.d..
233 Ibid.
234 Ibid.
 change and its practical prerequisite. Gender justice and consciousness, the dual aspects of Shaheen’s mission, take up the ways in which social practices and the internalization of thoughts and feelings affect each other. This dialectic identifies consciousness and social justice as sites for the potential interruption and reformulation of social reality, intermingled in such a way such that changing one automatically changes the other.

Various activities fulfill Shaheen’s mission, from strategic advocacy campaigns and formal social service provision, to informal networking and resource mobilization. Shaheen serves both women and girls in Sultan Shahi. They offer craft classes in sewing, embroidery, and henna application; and language classes in English, Urdu, Telugu, and Hindi. They provide tutoring and exam coaching, in order to support girls’ educational attainment, which, as previously mentioned, is quite marginal and consequently stands as a matter of concentrated attention. Skill-building courses in typing and computers also support girls’ potential to enter into the labor market, as do trainings on income generation and microcredit. [Figs. 10, 11] In addition to ongoing activities, the Shaheen Center also offers occasional workshops on public health issues and politics, hosting discussions with representatives from local political parties and the municipal government. On a regular basis, the Center brings in medical personnel to run vaccination clinics that are open to the community. Other programs include cross-communal celebrations of religious holidays, such as breaking fast during Ramadaan with an iftar, or organizing a community rakhi ceremony.235 Finally, the Shaheen Center offers family

235 Rakhi is an annual festival observed by Hindus and Jains celebrating the bonds between sisters and brothers. The festival focuses on a ritual in which sisters tie a sacred thread (rakhi) around the wrist of their brothers as a symbol of their love and prayerful devotion, which then also symbolizes the brothers’ vow of protection.
and legal counseling for dispute resolution. All together, these programs bridge formal and nonformal education, and provide access both to individuals as well as the broader community. Girls and women constitute most of the participants in the Center’s activities, yet boys and men are also involved in a limited number of planned activities, and, of course, cases dealing with family law. It is helpful to understand the Center’s activities in terms of a foundation of regular and constant core activities, which are designed to meet pressing needs, and opportunities for the organization to expand from this base into more creative and improvisational programs, in response to emerging social and political contingencies.

Fig.10 Girls and women in the computer room at Shaheen.
The Shaheen Center staff and participants include women and girls of diverse ages and religious, ethnic, caste, and class identities. In addition to founder Jameela Nishat and other women organizers who sit on the board, there are 14 young women who are the staff of the Shaheen Center, of which 10 are Muslim. Except for one divorcee in her 30s, the staff are all young and unmarried. Most of them in Sultan Shahi and originally came to the Center as students, so they have come of age throughout the duration of their involvement with the Center. On a daily basis, anywhere from 35 to 80 girls, and about a dozen women, come to Shaheen. Based on my observations over the course of 18 months, most of the mature women who visit Shaheen are Muslim. While

Unmarried young women are often called ‘girls’ in India, and I follow this cultural convention here.
the demographic make-up of the girls is a bit more mixed, they are still approximately 60% Muslim. It is, therefore, a Muslim-majority space, yet a significantly mixed one. In this respect, the Shaheen Center parallels COVA, as both organizations involve people from different communities and are, therefore, cross-communal, yet the public simultaneously perceives them as Muslim projects given that the majority of their participants are Muslim.

The social space of the Shaheen Center moulds its feminist function into a distinctly feminist form, one marked by openness and ready adaption to diverse purposes. From the time the Center opens in the late morning until it closes in the early evening, women and girls – and sometimes a few men and boys – come and go. People drop in to read one of the four newspapers delivered daily. Women come in to talk about health problems, to seek advice about dowry harassment or domestic abuse, or to solicit support regarding conflict with family or neighbors. Frequently, women come in seeking support around issues of polygamy. Once, I sat in the front room and listened to a woman who was a second wife protest, with palpable unhappiness, the fact that her husband has taken a third wife. (Prior to agreeing to meet with the husband, Shaheen staff gently pointed out that her husband’s first wife likely experienced similar discomfort when her own marriage – which was her husband’s second – was contracted.) And on more than one occasion that I personally observed, a woman came in seeking a helpful intervention regarding her husband’s failure to fulfill his conjugal obligations. Such conversations,

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237 Dowry harassment involves pressuring a new bride for greater payment of dowry, even after a wedding has taken place.
while private in nature, are not withheld from girls visiting the Center, and consequently provide an implicit introduction to the lived realities of adult sexuality.

While women stop by throughout the day for different kinds of dispute resolution and advice, starting in the early afternoon, girls come in a steady stream. Sometimes they come alone, but most often in pairs or groups. Girls of all ages, in all kinds of dress – some in pigtails and school uniforms, some in _burqas_ and _niqab_ – regularly saunter in and out. Some come for classes or tutoring, others just stop in looking for friends or siblings. Some head up to the roof, where they can look over the comings and goings of the neighborhood, or possibly look over any attractive neighborhood youth. On any given day, you can see girls talking in groups, listening to teachers and tutors, showing each other how to do something, practicing typing or embroidery, playing games, leafing through the newspapers, and, often, giggling.

The openness of the space reflects the desires of the organizers to have a space where the girls can just _be_ – be however, whatever, and whoever they want to be. This open and inclusive environment is the conscious effect of the Center’s feminist approach to deconstructing gender roles. As one of the organizers put it, “There are other centers that offer classes and try to help girls’ with coaching [for exams], but they are always trying to get the girls to act in a certain way, to make sure they are, you know, appropriate. We don’t want to force anything upon the girls. They can come here and just relax, talk to friends, learn something new.” The structured elements of the Center – the classes, workshops, and tutorials – are like a skeleton, on which the girls and women can flesh out, so to speak, their own needs and desires. Anthropologist Michael Jackson notes that the quest to find some kind of ‘natural’ self which exists prior to any kind of social
experience needs to be replaced with a more robust understanding of the subject as one which moves between more-structured and less-structured modes of experience. Following this, we can say that the organizers of Shaheen seek to mark out a space that is ‘less-structured.’ Such minimal structuring is, as the quote above illustrates, a feminist strategy to counter what they see as the calcification of religious, gender, and social identity. To be sure, this minimal structuring is still intentional and results from conscious choices on the part of Shaheen’s organizers and staff. It is not the spontaneous or organic falling away of structured modes of experience, but rather the purposeful creation of a casual atmosphere. In terms of temporal and spatial structures, the organization of Shaheen allows for girls to make use of its resources as they will. This enables the space of the Shaheen Center to be imagined as a necessary experience of freedom, of a release from the strictures and over-determination of the social field.

The organizers and staff of Shaheen understand the physical and social space of the center as an alternative to the broader society. This sense of alterity functions to mark particular ways of being, struggling, and sociality as feminist. In contrast to social gender norms about comportment, behavior, and appearance, the Center claims to be a space that refuses to constrain women with notions of what is ‘appropriate’. Distinguishing the feminist organization of social space from the broader society also diverges from social welfare efforts that target women and girls, including Islamic social welfare agencies. When women and girls are made the objects of social work, their gender identity becomes the basis for their involvement and participation in such a way as to run the risk

of its reification. Particularly when creating interventions with Muslim youth and women affected by communal riots, some local Islamic social welfare agencies initiated rehabilitation projects in which adherence to gendered dress codes and religious education programs is expected as a pre-condition for reintroduction into social relations within the Muslim community and into the larger Indian society.\textsuperscript{240} The Shaheen Center rejects “the well-intentioned hegemony” of social welfare approaches to programming for young girls.\textsuperscript{241} Instead, the Center maintains an approach to working with young Muslim girls that diverges from that of many Islamic social welfare agencies, as they do not affirm any particular dress code or expressions of gender identity as intrinsically ‘Islamic’. Further, they are committed to working with women and girls from diverse communities. Shaheen’s broad feminist social critique encompasses a more specific critique of gender ideology in Islamic social welfare efforts. They resist the formalization of normative ideals of how Muslim girls should present themselves in public and they encourage the cross-communal engagement of Muslim women and girls. Neither physical comportment nor social bonds are taken to be definitive of religious identity.

In this conceptualization of the Shaheen Center, space, desire, and subjectivity are interrelated. By creating a semi-structured space in the Center, there is room for the girls to define it and therefore themselves. The construction of physical space in the Shaheen Center works in relation with the construction of desire as a foundational need of the self.

\textsuperscript{240} After the Gujarat pogrom in 2002, a few orphanages for Gujarati orphans were established in Hyderabad. The orphanages were founded to provide care to children who lost their parents, but they were established far from Gujarat in Hyderabad because, according to the founders, it was a ‘safer’ Muslim environment for the children.

\textsuperscript{241} Kamala Visveswaran, \textit{Fictions of Feminist Ethnography} (Minneapolis: University of Minneasota Press, 1994) 65.
As founder Nishat puts it, “the girls need a space where they can move, feel, and speak as they wish.” Giving girls the physical and affective space to be as they desire assumes that they will navigate the internal world of their desires. Indeed, it assumes that the girls should have an internal world, along with the interpretive frame to nurture it. Desire, being as one wishes, is both necessary to and expressive of subjectivity because it provokes reflexivity. The way that Center supports women and girls depends upon its feminist construction of the self as that which engages sedimented being. In the geologic process of sedimentation, particles in motion respond to the forces acting upon them by settling out of fluid until they rest against some kind of barrier. What is sedimented is what does not dissolve or erode: rock, for example, or cells from the media of their culturing. To account for the sedimentation of the self and to establish equilibrium between the self and the fluid social forces that surround it is the work of feminism in the Center.

Three aspects of this framing of the Shaheen Center’s work are worth highlighting insofar as they illuminate the feminist understanding of subject formation that undergirds the Center’s work with young women. First is the assumption of a deep relationship between spatialization and socialization: the physical environment is seen to sustain and buttress social practices of subject formation, so much so that to intervene in or create some alternative feminist subjectivity requires the construction of an alternate feminist space. The need is not only to uncover some organic play and emergence of desires, but for the space in which to cultivate that possibility. Secondly, this frame posits the social field as that which prevails upon and works on the self. This is, in part, a corollary of the spatialization-socialization relationship mentioned earlier: the self can be rediscovered,
healed, enlarged, unburdened, affirmed, and claimed when the forces of sociality can be held back, or even simply pushed off for a while. Girls, especially, because of their age and the inherent vulnerability of their dependency, can be overcome by damaging messages about their self- and social-worth and need this relief. Finally, the process of recognizing the sedimentation of self sets off a dynamic of human development. It establishes subjectivity in the ongoing process of recuperating being – self – that cannot be reduced to social forces. The idea is that this process of internal navigation matures into the ability to navigate the external social world, as girls become women who can act on their desires in their own lives. Shaheen creates a space for a feminist subjectivity that takes desire as expressive of a self which, when strengthened, can move into the social world without diminishing.

**The Experience of Education**

In the work of the Shaheen Center, feminist social development involves cultivating feminist subjects through activating a certain constellation of desires, such as the desire for self-definition and engagement in the social world. This constructive project entails responding to desires articulated by girls in the local community. For most of the young women in Sultan Shahi, education is their paramount aspiration. Most of the girls initially come to the Center seeking some opportunity to learn. Given the high rates of illiteracy and the general social, structural, and religious restrictions on girls’ education, promoting girls’ education is a crucial strategy for feminist social development. Yet formal schooling is only one aspect of education, writ broadly, and the Shaheen Center attempts to promote girls’ education with a broader, multifaceted process of learning in mind. This section takes the Shaheen Center’s advocacy of girls’ education
as a starting point, and then moves on to look closely at the qualitative effects of involvement in the Center has had in the lives of two young staff women. Attempting to understand how the Shaheen Center has made a difference in the broader educational trajectories of young women allows us to apprehend how the organization’s activities reshape their experience of the social and geographical terrains of their immediate life worlds.

Shaheen actively supports girls’ education in two ways: it helps individual girls advance their formal schooling, and it conducts public policy campaigns about the importance of girls’ education. Many of the girls who come to the Center seek help in their class requirements. At Shaheen, they receive tutoring in particular subjects like English or math, and they get help in studying for the national exams that permit them to advance to the next stage of schooling. The tutoring classes and exam coaching are free, which is unique as most places charge some minimal fees that can be prohibitive for poor families. Providing these educational resources to individual girls constitutes the focal point of daily activities at the Shaheen Center. On a community level, the Shaheen Center also coordinates its own advocacy campaigns to promote community support for girls’ education. They host public speakers, hold rallies, and coordinate workshops for teachers and other community leaders. All of Shaheen’s public efforts in support of girls’ education involve polylingual discourse. Signs, speeches, protest chants, and songs are presented in Urdu, Hindi, Telegu, and English, reflecting the mixed language context of the Old City. The message is designed to reach everyone in her own native language. For the girls involved in the Shaheen Center, this public advocacy of girls’ education offers social validation and legitimacy for their own personal dreams and decisions.
As previously mentioned, the educational attainment of girls in the Old City is still quite limited. Girls who complete schooling and graduate high school are the exception and not the norm. In such a community context, advocating for girls’ education pushes against prevailing social conventions. Some of the girls who come to the Center to get support in pursuit of education face resistance from their families. One of the young women on staff, Tasneem, explained that her parents pulled her out of school when she was 12 years old. She said, “For five years, I sat at home doing housework. I would cook, I would clean. I washed the dishes. I had no friends anymore outside my family. I came here when my neighbor told me about it. I was 17 years old. After that, I pushed my father to let me finish my high school. He told me no, so for 11 days I did not eat. What could I do? I had to show him how I was suffering. Finally, they let me come.” For a young woman to perform a hunger strike against her own parents is a powerful act of self-assertion, one not uncommon in the Old City. Without other resources to leverage, the body is an intrinsically organic vehicle for individuation. Hunger strikes are a part of the political culture of India, a traditional strategy for re-negotiating power relations.\footnote{Gandhi utilized hunger strikes as one of the strategies of \textit{satyagraha}, ‘soul force’ or civil disobedience, against British rule in favor of Indian self-determination.}

The culture of eating in Indian families makes food a site for negotiating the intimate relations that mark domesticity. Not all of the girls have to struggle for family support, and certainly some parents are quite grateful for the free assistance their girls can get at the Shaheen Center. Yet for the girls who push against family restrictions, public confirmation of the importance of girls’ schooling bolsters their own courage and justification for pursuing more education. It imbricates girls in supra-familiar circles of belonging that afford other possibilities and self-realization.
Promoting girls’ education is the major issue of public policy addressed at the Shaheen Center, yet their own approach to education involves holistic human development and experiential learning. Formal education, schooling, constitutes just one facet of education in their view. For Shaheen, education as they define it transcends formal curricula to encompass other dimensions of human social development. When Shaheen organizers encourage the young women on staff to pursue an education, they refer to sources of knowledge and the development of skills which cannot be found in the objectives of formal school curricula: learning how to reflect on one’s actions, learning how to relate to people who are different, and learning how to deconstruct and then reconstruct social expectations put upon one’s self all are part of the ‘education’ they say girls need. This broad approach to education means that all of the activities of the Center count as valuable learning.

Shaheen organizers are especially keen to provide an experiential education of personal and social development to the 14 girls who are the staff at the Center. They have learned how to teach classes, to conduct public health surveys, and to facilitate workshops on topics like HIV, conflict resolution, and women’s human rights. They have learned how to support and advocate for victims of domestic violence and to counsel girls who are resisting marriage or trying to further their education. Individually and as a group, they are an emerging source of leadership in the community.

In order to grasp the broader effects of the Shaheen Center’s approach to education, I want to look closely at mobility maps created by two Muslim staff members, Shameem and Asma, who originally came to Shaheen when they were finishing high school, and were both about 20 years old at the time these were drawn. Mobility maps are
drawings that visually represent a person’s movements both within and outside of her community.\textsuperscript{243} Such maps can be used to discover patterns of spatial mobility for a particular group – in this case, the young women staff of the Shaheen Center. Information from these maps can also be analyzed for socially differentiated access to resources, institutions, and external contact.\textsuperscript{244} Participating staff members were directed (in Hindi-Urdu) to draw a map of the places they used to go before they became involved with Shaheen. After everyone had drawn this first map, they were then asked to draw a map of the places they visit in their lives now. The directions did not specify either the scale or arrangement of the map. Each participant thus made a pair of ‘before Shaheen’ and ‘after Shaheen’ maps that reflect some of the qualitative changes in their activities, and even in the way they imagine their world.\textsuperscript{245} The first pair of mobility maps [Fig.12] demonstrates the ways involvement in the Shaheen Center brought about new and diverse kinds of social contact for a young woman on staff named Shameem.

\textsuperscript{243} The mobility mapping exercise was conducted by a staff person from the local office of Catholic Relief Services, an agency that has been steadily funding the Shaheen Center for several years.

\textsuperscript{244} Mobility maps come out of the movement to change the production of knowledge in international development by creating participatory research tools and methods that involve community stakeholders. For a more detailed description, see: Berg et al. \textit{Introduction of a Participatory and Integrated Development Process (PIDEP) in Kalomo District, Zambia - Volume II - Manual for Trainers and Users of PIDEP}. Centre for Advanced Training in Agricultural and Rural Development, Humboldt University Berlin (Weikersheim: Margraf, 1997).

\textsuperscript{245} The language situation of youth in the Old City and surrounding areas can be complicated, as many go to schools where the medium of instruction is not the same at their natal/home language. This can result in mixed skills and gaps between oral expression and writing capability. For example, some youth have learned to write their native language in the script of another language (native Urdu speakers writing in Telugu characters). In drawing the mobility maps, some of the girls did not feel confident about their writing abilities, and asked other girls with better penmanship skills to transcribe their words. Both of the maps analyzed here were written by the girls themselves without assistance.
Fig. 12 Shameem’s before and after mobility maps.

The places listed in each of these mobility maps, reading the grid-like layout from left to right, are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>house</td>
<td>Yousufguda to attend meetings (2 times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gowlipura</td>
<td>Rajendranagar to attend AIDS training (5 days)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunty house</td>
<td>Srikakulam, Mallyguda, Nolganda, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gowliguddachaman</td>
<td>(socio-economic survey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charminar (with mother and brother)</td>
<td>Vizag (Insaf)²⁴⁶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Charminar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NTR Gardens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ASRC²⁴⁷</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

²⁴⁶ Indian Social Action Forum, a large national pro-democracy organization.
The qualitative and quantitative difference between these two mobility maps is striking. Shameem’s before map lists five places: two of which refers to domestic life (her natal home and the home of one aunt), two neighborhoods of the Old City, and one recreational site, the historic Old City Charminar monument. Interestingly, Charminar is the only site included in both mobility maps: aside from the monument, there is a radical discontinuity between the two maps, as the second map records entirely new locations and institutional sites. The second map contains almost five times as many places, and of more diverse kinds. Included are places visited in relation to collaborations with other NGOs, such as meetings and trainings. Multiple educational sites are also mentioned: research centers, colleges and universities, an Urdu cultural center, and a

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247 American Studies Research Center at Osmania University, now known as the Inter Universities International Studies Center, which houses one of the more well-known libraries in the city.

248 Charminar is the site where women from COVA formed the riot-preventing human chain discussed in chapter 3.
museum. Current mobility patterns also involve two crucial government institutions: the police station and the local city government. More recreational places are mentioned, as well: a public garden, a movie theater, and a restaurant (colloquially called ‘hotels’). Finally, the second map brings in the religious, as the last site listed is the local shrine of a woman – *Jat-pat Bibi ki dargah* – known to be especially efficacious in granting suplicatory prayers. It is telling that there is no mosque placed on either map. The only site for religion on Shameem’s map lies at the intersecting coordinates of Sufism (and a woman Sufi at that) and personal ritual devotion: Jat-pat-Bibi’s shrine.

While the mobility maps drawn by Shameem depict a multiplication and diversification of social connection in her life since becoming involved with the Shaheen Center.

The second pair of mobility maps [Fig.13] drawn by Asma, another young woman on staff, reflects a dramatic difference in scale. Whereas the before map is centered around the famous Char Minar monument, the after map shifts away from the local urban landscape into a national frame, marking cities and places in several states.

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249 Educational sites included the ASRC, a satellite branch of Jawaharlal Nehru Technical University, City College, and Hyderabad Central University.
250 MCH stands for the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad, the local city government.
251 The shrines of local saints are most commonly used for ‘ordinary’ rather than ‘festive’ rituals. Most people visit such shrines to offer prayers “for a favour from God through the mediation of the saint.” (Christian W. Troll, ed., *Muslim Shrines in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) vii.)
Fig. 13 Asma’s before and after mobility maps.

**Before**

many places of Old City
many places of Hyd
Golkanda
Jogipet
Gandhi Bhavan
Hasannagar
Vatlapally
Charminar (image)
Musheerabad
Babanagar
Azampura
Moghalpura
Reshma Center
Shalibonda

**After**

Kandala
Bangalore
Mysore
Tamilnadu
Mumbai
Delhi
Dehradun
Chattisgarh
Madurai
Many places of Andhra Pradesh
Unlike Shameem’s maps which were laid out like a grid, Asma’s maps attempt to convey a sense of local geography by placing Charminar in the center, such that all of sites are organized in a radial pattern commencing at the monument. Asma’s first mobility map contains many sites, including the zoo, Golkonda fort, a school, and her college. Note that it was only Shameem’s second map that included educational sites. One other difference to note is Asma’s inclusion of religious education in her first map (“Hudu Center” is a small institute offering Qur’an lessons next to the mosque near Asma’s home) and then it completely falls out of the second map. The different ways that religion figures on Asma and Shameem’s maps demonstrates how profoundly variegated the religious background of Muslim women can be. Some are exposed to formal lessons in reading the Qur’an and performing ritual prayers, and others have no outside instruction at all and no contact with public religious institutions. Asma’s first map is urban: the city, with its historical divisions into the Old City and newer Hyderabad,
encompasses the many different neighborhoods between which she moved. The second map leaves this cosmopolitan context behind, and shifts completely into a national scale. There is a stark outline of India, and within it the state of Andhra Pradesh. Turning from the detailed cityscape of her urban world, what we see next to the outline of the nation is a list of other cities, such that each place name seems like a shorthand reference to what we can imagine is an equally detailed and complex metropolis. Following as it does the list of cities, the simple reference to ‘many places’ within the state comes across as a display of confidence, as if navigating such places can be taken for granted (they don’t even merit specification) after having moved through larger, multipart, and complicated cities like Delhi and Mumbai.

The Shaheen Center is linked with other local organizations promoting women’s rights and communal harmony, so most of the young woman staff members, including Shameem and Asma, have traveled across India to attend various workshops and trainings in different cities. Such networks draw out the focused local knowledge of those involved in similar projects, thereby translating the spatial frame of the neighborhood, which is the foundation of the Shaheen Center, into the composite frame of the nation and broad scale social change. It is worthy to note that although both Shameem and Asma have been involved in this kind of national network activity, only Asma chose to frame her concluding mobility map in terms of the most distant places she has been. Their maps, then, reflect their different perceptions of mobility: mobility in the sense of regular, daily routines and circuits, on the one hand; and mobility in the sense of traversing the furthest possible area, as a kind of achievement, on the other.
These pairs of mobility maps give us information about the kinds of social contact and imaginative frames that have been transformed as a result of being involved with the Shaheen Center. They display expanded movement in the world. This was true of all of the mobility maps made by Shaheen staff. It is possible that some of the changes seen in these mobility maps reflect a predictable course of human development, changes that might have occurred in their lives whether they were involved with the Center or not. Certainly, their memories of their lives before being involved with Shaheen have been influenced by the feminist discourse of the Center, which encourages them to see themselves as comparatively more conscious and more empowered.

Yet I want to be cautious about assuming, as some development practitioners might, that mobility clearly indexes empowerment. There is no guarantee that mobility might not later retract, or that mobility secures a sense of personal efficacy, social engagement, and mutual respect. There is also no need for the breadth and depth of mobility to be the same for all members of a particular social group. An enlarged scope of mobility does not resolve questions about the quality of interactions it brings about, since mobility is not intrinsic to empathy or the affirmation of social complexity, and does not necessarily deepen integration or broaden inclusion. It has the potential to do so, but that telos cannot be taken for granted. One need only think of the thousands of South Asian migrant workers employed in the Gulf to grasp the limited effects of mobility on wellbeing. So there are, to be sure, crucial factors that are not mapped here. But what these maps do demonstrate is that the young women attribute the difference in their own education to their involvement in the Shaheen Center – education broadly referring to their ability to navigate different social institutions and contexts, as well as their human
and professional development. The maps show how they imagine the Shaheen Center as instrumental to qualitative changes in their personal trajectories and their social worlds.

The Shaheen Center’s understanding of education incorporates from feminist theory an emphasis on experience as “knowledge which cannot be appropriated.”

Shaheen program activities take institutional education as a starting point which can build out into more fulsome and complex learning situations. Although formal education remains a critical advocacy issue at Shaheen, schooling is not an end in an of itself: what difference does it make if girls complete school through the tenth grade if they are then kept at home where their only role is to execute domestic duties? The goal of education must be for young women to enter the broader social, cultural, and political world. Initial formal education stands as an essential gateway through which girls must pass – must be allowed to pass – if they are to be capable of learning how to participate in shaping collective life. Formal education is critically important to establishing foundational skills that can then be applied in the development of multifaceted social connections and political participation.

Having looked at the effect of the Shaheen Center’s projects for young women in Sultan Shahi, we can see that the activities counter social fragmentation by bringing together young women from different communities, and also counter exclusion by connecting them with unfamiliar social and political institutions. The experience of education is therefore also an experience of personal development and of nurturing a publicly political self. The Shaheen Center redresses social fragmentation by encouraging

255 Vishveswaran 20.
young women to explore simultaneously their internal and external worlds. With this broad understanding of the feminist project of the Shaheen Center, we turn now to look at how religion figures into its daily activities. Keeping in mind the dual focus on social and internal worlds, we will see how religion is also understood through its symbolic and institutional dimensions. When the Shaheen Center’s activities involve religion, we see how confirming the rich existential language and expressive vocabulary found in religious traditions and practices allows women to challenge patriarchal religious authority.

**Genealogies of Muslim Feminism**

As a social development project, the Shaheen Center seeks to cultivate feminists to advocate for gender justice and develop cross-communal contact among women and girls from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. Like COVA, Shaheen is a secular organization whose work necessarily involves engaging religion. Staff of the Center engage religion through the commitment to communal harmony and through public campaigns that challenge some socio-cultural practices sanctioned by traditional religious authorities. For feminists, the secular sphere of civil society can offer a platform of ideas, practices, and networks that can be used to critique the construction of gender in religion and construct alternatives. The Shaheen Center contests certain formulations of Islamic law, and challenges popular religious ideology of gender. The Center, as it pursues a nominally secular mission of gender justice, also actively participates in local contestations of Islam. Also similar to COVA, the Shaheen Center puts forth normative ideas about religion that are shaped by the commitment to communal harmony, but they differ from COVA in terms of framing this as a feminist concern.
In order to understand the ways in which religion becomes a critical issue for the women and girls of Shaheen, I want to first focus on Jameela Nishat, the Muslim woman who is its founder and principal organizer. The Shaheen Center is, more than anything, her project: it is her charismatic presence that shapes the environment in the Center, and her feminist political and religious sensibilities that guide its programs and activities. Because of the age discrepancy between Jameela and the younger women who are on staff, she exerts a tremendous amount of influence within the Center. Her views of Islam and religion have authority and weight within the collective discourse at Shaheen. She cannot control the multiple and idiosyncratic interpretations of religion, as the discussion in the following section will show, and she does not necessarily want to. But her understanding of Islam does sway, model, and compel religious engagement at Shaheen. My exploration of Jameela’s view of religion and Islam draws on a variety of sources, from observation, structured and unstructured interviews, and her own published poems. These diverse sources demonstrate how Jameela’s Muslim identity is rooted in a radically personal relationship to the divine. Such a definition of Islam shifts away from textual practices, traditional figures of authority, and issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxy in favor of accentuating and giving weight to individual experience and exigencies in interpreting religion. Religion, in Shaheen’s engagement, parallels notions of the self, for it too suffers sedimentation through the fluid force of society. Part of the effort to establish gender justice and feminist consciousness involves what Elisabeth Schussler

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Fiorenza calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which retrieves the symbolic sources and devotional practices that sustain women’s being from patriarchal tradition, as the following account taken in full from my fieldnotes demonstrates.257

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Fieldnotes: I am sitting in the back of a packed hall. It is over 100 degrees outside, edging towards what will become an unbearably hot summer in a few more weeks. There are approximately 150 women gathered here, as part of a campaign sponsored by the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation to promote girls’ education. Almost all of the women are wearing black burqas. I expect them to take them off, because of the heat. It would be permissible given there are only women in the room, but the space is, apparently, still public enough that no one does. The burqa is explained to me as marking gender, but even in large public gatherings of hundreds or thousands of women with no men around, women don’t take them off. The idea behind this particular gathering is to inspire these women, all of whom are mothers, regarding the importance of educating their girl children. That’s the word the organizers use: inspire. In order to attract their interest, the city government is serving lunch and has brought along a doctor-nurse team who will give free medical exams to those who want or need one.

I arrive with Jameela, who is one of three speakers addressing the women. She is talking about the importance of girls’ education as a provision for the future, or rather against the future, as a way to ensure that girls-become-women will be able to take care of themselves and their own children under any circumstances. She gives examples about needing to be able to have the knowledge to assume one’s rights, how reading the newspaper and understanding government policy enable someone to get a ration card, or keep health records. After a few minutes, she starts talking about how some people keep their girls at home in the name of religion. Jameela claims this is not Islam, it is a cultural practice, because Islam recognizes women have rights. “Islam is not all duties, no rights

for women. No, that is not religion.” She continues to explain what she means, drawing on the paradigmatic story of the woman known as Bibi Hajrah, or Hagar as she is called in English, the Egyptian concubine given to the patriarch Ibrahim (Abraham) by his then barren wife Sarah. According to Islamic traditions, after the birth of their son, Isma’il, Ibrahim brings Bibi Hajrah along with the child to the Ka’aba in Mecca, where he then leaves them. When she runs out of water and the child begins to suffer, Bibi Hajrah runs up and down the mountains of Safa and Marwa seven times looking for water, until the angel Gabriel takes pity on her and Isma’il and opens up the sacred well of Zamzam. In addressing the audience of Muslim women, Jameela declares:

I have an interpretation of religion.

Bibi Hajrah, she is the paradigm of the Muslim. What happened to her? Abraham left her alone, alone with her baby, and she was all alone. And she survived. She made it through. When I say to people we are like Bibi Hajrah, they understand.

When people go on the Hajj, and hundred of thousands of people go on the Hajj, everything that we do is in memory of her. When we run in the desert, it is because she ran in the desert. When we look for water, it is like her looking for water. When people are making Hajj, they are imitating her, they keep her in mind. We are close to her then. So we must remember that, remember her suffering and keep it in our hearts. We are alone. We are cold, hungry, no water. There is no water here in the slum. Our life is like that. But Allah is with us. We have to show that Allah is with us women, too. We have to do that.

* * * *

Jameela’s discourse here is remarkable both for its hermeneutics and its symbolism. Focusing on this oral narrative as an instance in which Jameela articulates her understanding of religion highlights three elements. First, prior to her recollection of Bibi Hajra, Jameela begins with the explicit announcement ‘I have an interpretation of religion.’ Religion is introduced as a hermeneutical project: interpretation opens, as it were, the door into religious tradition. This statement subtly yet lucidly posits religion as
interpretable, claimable, and dynamic. Jameela further establishes herself as an interpreter of religion, marking out and making available a position that could be assumed by any of the women in her audience.

Secondly, Jameela posits Bibi Hajrah as the paradigmatic Muslim, and recollects the pious commemoration of her suffering in the desert that is performed and ritually enacted during the Hajj. The choice of Bibi Hajrah here, and not say Muhammad or Ibrahim who are often held up as model Muslims in their submission and surrender to Allah, is significant. Clearly, there is the obvious connection of choosing a woman in addressing an audience of women, but Jameela invokes Bibi Hajrah, and not say, Maryam, the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur’an. It is Bibi Hajrah’s suffering which affords a symbolic intimacy with the lives of the women in Jameela’s audience, as she links their own material conditions – the lack of clean water facilities in the slum – with Bibi Hajrah’s trials in the desert. Interestingly, in Jameela’s account, there is no mention of the miraculous wellsprings of water to indicate the wonder of divine power; there is instead an emphasis on Bibi Hajrah’s tenacity and endurance, the fact that she ‘survived,’ and ‘made it through.’ Rather than the divine intervention which becomes the focal point of the traditional narrative, Jameela emphasizes her staying power and stamina as signs of the divine presence. Jameela encourages her audience to think of Bibi Hajra in an imaginatively act of identification, but then dramatically shifts back into the daily lives of the women she is speaking to such that the story of Bibi Hajrah becomes a symbolization of their own suffering.

Finally, Jameela closes by shifting into an unambiguously theological register. The claim that ‘Allah is with us’ provides a capstone to her narrative performance. It is a
clearly unambiguous statement, a matter of fact as it were, tethering herself and the women in the audience in a present reality that is not separate from divine reality. This theological assertion of Allah’s presence, once stated, can be seen as the telos of the narrative. Bibi Hajrah’s suffering, the cyclical rituals of its reenactment, the women’s own difficulties and trials in living in slums, can all be reread and reinterpreted in light of the assertion of the presence of Allah. Specifically, this assertion comes after what has been a gendered theological narrative of suffering and endurance: Bibi Hajrah suffered as a woman, because of her concubinage and subsequent rivalry with Sarah, and Ibrahim’s household casts her out as a mother, with her child. Jameela addresses her audience not just in terms of their suffering (being alone and hungry), but also in terms of culturally gendered domestic obligations: fetching water, often from public pumps. In the face of their own gendered suffering, Jameela asserts the presence of the divine. Yet this is not something she nor her audience can take for granted, as she immediately follows this assertion with the pedagogical command to ‘show Allah is with us women, too.’

Theology, here, needs social translation. ‘Allah is with us’ is a statement of fact, yet one whose intelligibility is limited to the audience, for others still need to be ‘shown.’ Notice how the discourse begins with Muslims, writ large, yet closes with the gender difference between Muslims: ‘we’ women who are cognizant of the divine presence among us are distinct from those to whom it still remains to be shown. God’s presence, however, has the potential to overcome those differences, to be shown and ‘seen’ by all.

Jameela’s address to the women gathered in the girls’ education forum presents religion as an interpretive project and herself as both a woman and an interpreter of religion. She then offers Bibi Hajrah as an imaginary exemplar of the experience of
surrendering to the divine, one which compels the women to see their own suffering linked to the trials women have faced in history and the ways in which the sacred has supported them – not so much through miracles as much as through their own capacity for endurance. In closing, Jameela makes a theological turn to claim the divine presence among those in whose lives it is commonly denied. Her narration of the story of Bibi Hajrah to women slum dwellers performs a feminist interpretation of Islam, and she explicitly states her hope that the audience will model their own performance on hers: her instruction is also an invocation.

Such instances of ‘lived religion’ form a unique popular perspective on tradition, community, and theological ethics for a group of women who have been largely excluded from formal religious education about Islam.258 Meredith McGuire reminds us that

We need to take seriously not merely the packages of religious narratives supplied by institutions but – more important – the myriad ways by which ordinary people remember, share, enact, adopt, create, and combine the ‘stories’ out of which they live. In contrast to religion-as-preached (whether one promoted by a religious institution or one ‘preached’ by a spokesperson for one of the many ‘spiritual’ alternatives), each individual’s religion-as-lived is constituted by these often-mundane practices for remembering, sharing, and creatively assembling their most vital religious narratives.259

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258 The level of formal education for many adult Muslim women in the Old City remains limited, given the historically prevalent practice of removing girls from school at the onset of puberty. This is changing, with each generation reaching higher levels of educational attainment than the previous. For those Muslim women whose access to education was restricted, their opportunities to learn about Islamic tradition and practice were primarily oral, and were supplemented through popular media such as television and radio.

McGuire describes the ways ‘ordinary’ people constitute lived religion through their creative appropriation of traditional stories. Building on McGuire’s observation, it is especially important to note that particular circumstances of gender, class, culture and other social identities powerfully inflect this creative assemblage. Jameela’s creative telling of the story of Bibi Hajrah is a performance designed to capture the pathos of gendered suffering by framing it in terms of sacred history. Jameela’s discourse on the divine presence takes hold of that pathos and then releases it into a social command: we have to show that Allah is with us women. Ultimately, she claims, divine realities need to be understood in the social world.

The example above of the spontaneously narrated story of Bibi Hajrah is one example of Jameela’s understanding of Islam which exerts a marked influence on the Shaheen Center. Other sources that illuminate Jameela’s interpretation of religion include her published poetry. Urdu, Jameela’s native language, has a rich oral and textual poetic tradition. Urdu poetry maintains a significant place in both the aesthetic and devotional traditions of Muslims in South Asia, and the influence of Hyderabad’s historical court culture can still be seen in public poetic performances today. While the current generation experiences the Urdu poetic tradition as much through television as it does in public gatherings, Jameela came of age at a time when family and social gatherings were occasions to recite and share poetic works. The following poem takes up the theological and religious themes typical of the broader body of her work.

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The poem commemorates the death of two sisters who were killed in the Old City locality of Jehanuma. They were victims of domestic violence. The poem, in the first person singular, gives voice to one of the dead girls, in an act of poetic recuperation and reclamation which typifies the concern in feminist theory “to take the problematic of voicing as a starting point.” The text of the poem:

You threw kerosene on me
and burnt me to ashes
but from the ashes I rose like a phoenix
and danced.

You cast an evil spell on me
beat me with a rod,
shed my blood.
It is this red stream which is life,
the new life that has
Awakened in Jehanuma.
I am shakti, power,
I am Yellamma.
Whenever you beat me
life rose in me like a wave
I am a phoenix clinging to the dried up
breast of time.
I am a phoenix
I have found new life,
new life, new orbits,
new domes, new minars.
The muezzin’s call from the mosque
The temple bells,
Dha dhin dhin dha,
Out of the ashes I emerge
like a phoenix
and dance.\textsuperscript{262}

This is a poem about resurrection – the reanimation of destroyed life. The verses chronicle the murder of two sisters, who died after being set afire, and transforms their

\textsuperscript{261} Visveswaran 31.
\textsuperscript{262} Nishat, \textit{Lava}, 57.
death through the symbolism of the phoenix, the being who continually rises to new life from the ashes of the old. The poem shifts perspective from describing what was done, to self-presentation. The narrator presents her identity through a multiplicity of verbs: despite the attempts to destroy her, she rises, emerges, clings, finds, and dances. After being burnt, curse, beaten, and bled, she revives.

This existential renewal is described in terms of a hybrid religious imaginary. Jameela uses religious terms and symbols from both Hindu and Muslim traditions to describe the efficacy and endurance of the woman, who says ‘I am shakti, I am Yellamma.’ Shakti is the primordial power, the divine and, significantly, feminine creativity, in Hindu cosmology. It is worshipped in various goddess (devi) forms throughout South Asia. Yellamma is one such devi, the patron goddess of the oppressed – Dalits, lower castes, and tribal people. To claim to be shakti and Yellamma is to encompass the most cosmic and the most intimate manifestations of the divine within oneself. From the invocation of the feminine divine, the narrator then describes what she has found in terms of the ‘new orbits, new domes, new minars.’ Just as she has been transformed, so she finds transformed religious institutions. There are new domes and new minarets for the new life of the self, which no longer goes back to the old religious architecture. In the closing image of the poem, the marking of time in sacred space – the call to prayer, the ringing of temple bells – becomes the accompanying rhythm of the dance of new life.
Unlike Jameela’s performance of the story of Bibi Hajrah, which offered symbolic resources from the Islamic tradition for women struggling to make life in the slums viable, this poem draws on both Hindu and Muslim images. From Hinduism, she invokes the feminine divine power of cosmology and devotional practice, and from Islam, she takes the forms of religious architecture that have shaped regional aesthetic traditions. This poetic description of new life, of a new ‘I’ who describes herself and her new world, concludes with an image of woman dancing to the sounds of ritual devotion. She is not in the mosque or the temple, but is proximate to it. She hears and responds, not with the patterned gestures of worship, but with the creative expression of a dance. The closing lines illustrate a relationship between religion, on the one hand, and women, on the other, as symbolized through the narrator. In this depiction, religion contributes tempo and cadence, the measures of time that accrue into history; and women express their vitality through the unique arrangement of signs, motions, and actions. Women are not contained within religion – its forms, its repertoire of gestures – but rather make use of its pulses and its temporal structuring of experience.

These two different examples of Jameela’s religious discourse reflect her understanding of Islam. Perhaps it is not possible to articulate an individual’s interpretation of religion, not least because such interpretations are dynamic, continually being reworked and reformed in the course of daily life. And any understanding of religion is never ‘complete’ or ‘finished,’ I argue. Yet, as an outline of her unique interpretation of religion, these examples do illustrate some of the crucial aspects of the relationship between religion, gender, and social experience. As is evidenced by both the
poetic discourse and the performative narration, Jameela sees the relationship between Islam and gender justice as an intimate one. Religious symbols, sacred spaces, and cosmological imaginaries can be drawn on in women’s struggles to express and shape viable lives for themselves. These phenomena have an autonomous existence within society, which makes them available sources of power and inspiration for women. Through feminist engagement, religion offers existential and practical resources in the struggle for gender justice.

It is worth noting here that this position differs in some crucial respects from that of some (though not all) Muslim feminists. Many Muslim women committed to the cause of gender justice strive to “remain faithful,” as Amina Wadud puts it in *Gender Jihad*, “to the imperative that Muslim women appropriate Islamic primary sources, especially the Qur’an.”263 Such “indispensable” contributions to making the interpretive tradition more inclusive “raise the legitimacy of women’s claims to authority within the intellectual tradition.”264 This is a valuable project, laudable by all feminist standards. Jameela’s own project of reinterpretation, however, is different, and perhaps complementary. Her access point into the Islamic tradition is not through its textual or intellectual legacies, but through its cultural, popular, and everyday apprehension, which often intersects with gendered space.265 Both of these strategies are efforts to shape the practice of Islam as it relates to gender justice. Perhaps it is best not to try to subsume one into the other, but to

263 Wadud 7.
264 Ibid.
265 In her memoir, Leila Ahmed describes the informal process of inculteration into women’s spaces as foundational to her understanding of how to be Muslim. See *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America – a Woman’s Journey* (New York: Penguin, 1999).
look at the contexts in which these diverse Muslim feminist strategies come to be seen as preferable or more urgent.

Jameela’s interpretation of religion contributes to the feminist project of making Islam available to women’s struggles for gender justice. It is not a matter of making religion ‘fit’ into women’s struggles, of prioritizing feminism to filter through tradition and culture: for Muslim feminists like Jameela, feminism corresponds to the sense of the sacred, the message of Islam. As Jameela puts it, the struggle is not to make sense of her Muslim identity, but to articulate or express it, to make it intelligible and communicable in a world in which the cultural grammar of religion is becoming more fixed and constrained. “Now,” she says, “if you are Muslim, and you are a woman, who can you be? You can be like Huma, wearing a burqa, being tentative, so fragile in this society. Or you can be Sania Mirza. That’s it, those are the two choices. You can be a shadow, invisible, or you can be that globalized girl with no culture, not connected I mean. That is what a Muslim girl can be. That is what means to be a Muslim woman, to make that choice.” The possibilities for Muslim identity are, in Jameela’s view, constricted to opposing and extreme options: either women become the embodied reification of patriarchal Islam, or they can (attempt to) divorce themselves from the tradition completely. Just as we saw in COVA, where the specter of the terrorist is a ‘mega-form’ of global life for Muslims, so too, do Muslim women confront ‘mega-forms’ of gender

266 Huma is one of the young women on staff at Shaheen. Sania Mirza is a professional tennis player from Hyderabad who catapulted to stardom during the period of my field research. After making several successful rounds on the professional tennis circuit, she came under attack from Muslim organizations for, among other things, her immodest dress, ie. the skirt commonly worn by female athletes in the sport of tennis.
against which or through which they must make themselves known. The cultural politics of religion leave no middle ground between the two for Muslim women.

**Contesting Feminist Religious Interpretation**

The space of the Shaheen Center is shaped by cultural politics that push against the rigidification of religious identity. The Center marks out a space in which religion and gender can be understood and experienced in a more dynamic fashion. It occupies a unique position: it attempts to sustain a feminist practice of communal harmony-building by bringing together women and girls from different ethno-religious backgrounds while also promoting cultural values which nourish less determinate and more idiosyncratic presentations of religion and gender. The staff and participants support these broad overarching efforts, yet this does not mean that the Shaheen Center itself is not a contested space. While the dominant influence of Jameela’s vision on the work of the Center is palpable, the younger women on staff still challenge her with their own interpretations of religion and their own expressions of gender identity. This chapter examines two such instances of feminist contestation. Instances of contestation do not disrupt, but in fact characterize Shaheen’s efforts to establish a feminist religious culture.

The first critical instance of feminist contestation of religion regards the public formulation of the Muslim marriage contract, the *nikahnama*. Muslims, who form 13% of India’s population, have a separate ‘personal law’ which governs matters relating to the
family: marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.\textsuperscript{267} The constitutional ability of each religious group to maintain distinct personal/family law is a colonial legacy from the British legal codification of religious identity. Since 1973, the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) has assumed the authority to define Islamic law – \textit{shariat} as it is known in Urdu – for Muslims. The authority of the AIMPLB is ultimately legally ambiguous, not to mention religiously problematic as India’s Muslim population includes not just Sunnis, but significant numbers of Twelver Shias, Ismailis, Bhoras, Ahmadis, and other groups, all of which follow different schools and practices of Islamic jurisprudence. Despite these theoretical limitations, the AIMPLB exerts a tremendous influence on religious structures and practices of family life for Muslims in India. Even though women and Shi’a have attempted to form alternate Muslim Personal Law Boards, these do not have the breadth of influence or history of statist support that the AIMPLB does. In April 2005, the AIMPLB issued a new \textit{nikahnama}, a formal marriage contract to be signed by both parties at the time of the marriage. The \textit{nikahnama} contains information about the couple, details about the \textit{mahr} (dower), and guidelines on marriage (including responsibilities of both parties) and the settlement of matrimonial disputes.\textsuperscript{268} The AIMPLB intended all Muslims in India seeking marriage to use the document.

\textsuperscript{267} Legal scholars note that the law regarding Muslim women in India contradicts itself, insofar as Muslim Personal Law grants men the authority to divorce by repudiation with the practice of ‘\textit{triple talaq}’ – divorce by repeating three times ‘I divorce you’ – while at the same time, the national Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, i.e. the passage of a law that can only apply to one gender. For a full analysis of this legal tension, which is often collapsed by placing Muslim women within the domain of Muslim Personal Law, see A. M. Bhattacharjee, \textit{Muslim Law and the Constitution} (Calcutta: Eastern Law House, 1994).

\textsuperscript{268} The \textit{nikahnama} dissuades women from pursuing dispute resolution in civil courts and instead grants local religious scholars the authority to mediate domestic disputes and marital conflict.
Muslim feminists across the country opposed the new *nikahnama* issued by AIMPLB. In particular, feminist objections focused on: the omission of a Muslim woman’s right to seek divorce; the acceptance of ‘triple *talaq,*’ whereby a Muslim man can immediately divorce his wife by saying three times ‘I divorce you’;\(^{269}\) omission of women’s inheritance rights; the inclusion of statements to the effect that the woman should obey her husband and seek his permission to go outside of the home; the stipulations that a wife should ‘guard her modesty,’ while no such similar codes are in effect for husbands;\(^ {270}\) and the silence about exploitative child marriages.\(^ {271}\) These issues led national Muslim women’s groups like Awaaz-e Niswan and others to claim that women’s “personal issues are being pushed into a ghetto.”\(^{272}\) For five years, Muslim feminists had held meetings with the AIMPLB, and had even gone so far as to draft a model *nikahnama* themselves, the protective provisions of which were not incorporated into the final version.\(^ {273}\)

\(^{269}\) The pronouncement of divorce, ‘I divorce you,’ can be done verbally, in person, but also via text message, email, video-conferencing, and online chat functions. The various media for pronouncing talaq have added to the controversy over its appropriateness. For background on divorce in Islamic law, see Ali (2010).

\(^{270}\) Q 24:30-31 recommends that both believing men and women ‘should lower their gaze and guard their modesty,’ hence many interpreters take the parallel structure of this verse to mean that modesty is meant to guide the comportment of both men and women.

\(^{271}\) In recent years, there have been several highly publicized cases involving older men from Arab countries in the Gulf who contracted marriages with young girls in Hyderabad after paying a large ‘brideprice’ to their families.


\(^{273}\) The All India Muslim Women’s Personal Law Board (founded in 2005) recommended the banning of triple talaq; the right of the woman to separate from her husband if he did not agree to divorce; and the ability of women to initiate divorce in cases of torture, abandonment, illicit extramarital affairs, and the husband contracting HIV.
The issuance of the new *nikahnama* provoked despair at the Shaheen Center. Jameela stated that she felt all of her work over the past several years was in vain. Still, Shaheen decided to organize a protest with other local feminist groups, including the All India Democratic Women’s Association. All of the Shaheen staff members – Muslim, Hindu, Dalit, Christian – participated in the organizing of the march. The issue of the *nikahnama* was not seen to be limited to only Muslim women, even though feminist criticism of the marriage contract involved a detailed understanding of Islamic jurisprudence. On the day of the protest, most of the women who came from the AIWDA were Hindu, or at least were not obviously identifiable as Muslim. The women organized by the Shaheen Center, however, included a majority of Muslim women from Sultan Shahi, along with women from other communities as well. When I talked with Sarita, one of the young Hindu women on staff at Shaheen, about the demonstration, she felt that it was one of the most important events that the Center had held that year. “The law has to protect all women, or it won’t protect any of us,” Sarita told me, when I asked her why the new *nikahnama* occasioned such an outcry. “We don’t do this *talaq* in my community, but I have seen twice men leave their wives with nothing – no food, no money for electricity. It is very hard for the woman.” Sarita, a young 19-year-old woman from a low-caste Hindu community, expressed her reasons for participating in creating a feminist alternative to the current formulations of Islamic law in terms of the potential for all women to be vulnerable to the suffering of poverty. Certainly, it is not possible to say whether she could have or would have been involved with the protest had she not been a

274 Founded in 1981, the All India Democratic Women’s Association advocates for greater participation of women in political and social life, focusing on issues of violence, communalism, public health policy, minority rights, and employment discrimination.
part of Shaheen. Yet the fact that she helped organize a demonstration against Muslim personal law with a multi-communal coalition of feminist organizations affirms the kind of cross-communal feminist practice of religious interpretation that Jameela envisions.

As a feminist, community-based project, the Shaheen Center addresses questions of gender roles, religious identity, social status, and personal mobility. Articulating public positions on such contentious issues leads to dissent and disagreement among those involved with the Center. While the girls, staff, and organizers all support the mission of promoting gender justice, there is not complete unanimity of opinion or a uniform social analysis about how to do this. For example, while the women organizers resist the wearing of burqa, the girls prefer to focus their resistance on changing social attitudes about patriarchy rather than practices of dress. As one girl Amina stated “Everyone wears burqa, I feel I should. What can I do? Of course, I want things to change for girls here in the Old City. That is why I think we should fight to ban [triple] talaq and change the nikahnama.” For girls like Amina, ambivalence about wearing burqa does not negate their commitment to struggle for women’s rights. The women organizers challenge the girls about wearing burqa, but there is no push for consensus or uniformity of opinion on the matter of wearing Islamic dress.

On one issue, however, Shaheen organizers persistently challenge the girls, and that is on the matter of communal relations. In contrast to the diversity of opinions on the

275 The question of veiling has receded and emerged within Muslim feminism, occasionally constituted as a crucial site of action and change and alternately marginalized when other issues are seen as more critical. For a discussion of the various positions of Muslim feminists on veiling, see Fadwa el-Guindi, Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance (Oxford: Berg, 1999) 177-186.
issue of dress, in matters of communal relations the Shaheen organizers insist on a feminist pedagogy of pluralism. All of the Shaheen organizers believe that promoting Muslim women’s rights and dignity means promoting communal harmony and the rights of all women because gender justice is inherently inclusive. They believe the threat of communal disintegration, tension, and alienation should be actively countered by supporting cross-communal spaces and activities for women. This position is new to many of the girls who have grown up in Sultan Shahi under an atmosphere of polarized communal relations. An incidental remark made by one of the young women on staff named Sultana occasioned the contestation of communal polarization. One day, Sultana praised another girl, Sajjida, for repudiating her family’s attempts to ban her from coming to the Center. Sultana recited a poetic couplet in Urdu comparing Sajjida’s courage to the Lashkar-e-Taiba, a group of Islamic extremists responsible for large-scale violent attacks across India.\(^{276}\) Sultana referenced Sajjida’s strength in transgressing boundaries in terms of the Lashkar, reading her nonviolent act of gender justice in terms of a group of men who use violence towards destructive ends. Two days later, Jameela sat down with Sultana to talk about the implications of her remarks. Later, Jameela told me “We cannot accept such things. She does not yet understand what we are working for. How can she? All of her life, in all of her environment, she hears this kind of thing. Those Lashkar people come into Sultan Shahi to try to talk to people. It’s all that she’s ever heard before now. It is going to take a long time for her to change. So we cannot give up. We have to hope she will learn.” Jameela does not expect that a quick intellectual deconstruction will

\(^{276}\) Lashkar-e-Taiba is a violent extremist movement operating in South Asia since the early 1990s. They were responsible for an attack on the India Parliament in 2001, which killed 14 people, and the more recent attacks on hotels in Mumbai in November 2008, which killed 166 people and wounded hundreds of others.
suffice to counter the influence of extremism in the local cultural imaginary. For the Shaheen organizers, challenging the role of religious extremists and supplanting existing frames of reference with feminist religious hermeneutics requires time and commitment. Yet there can be no gender justice without such effort.

The Space of Feminism

Two aspects of the Shaheen Center make it unique as a Muslim poverty alleviation project: first, its feminist commitments; and second, its community-based structure. The Center’s explicit feminism involves efforts to promote gender justice and consciousness of socio-religious oppression of women. They do not limit their concern to questions of economic development and improvement in the material conditions of women and girls in Sultan Shahi, but also attempt to support critical consciousness of religious and cultural practices that prevent women from taking full part in the social world. They do not ascribe to the idea that economic development alone fulfills the aspirations of poor women. Scholars note that economic development does not dismantle systems of patriarchal privilege, and may even be a way to manage the modernization of patriarchy.\(^{277}\) The “participation of women in social production is necessary but not sufficient to overcome their subordination. Only the development of gender-based forms of consciousness and organization can” do that.\(^{278}\) Shaheen recognizes the importance of consciousness in ending the subordination of women. In so doing, they expand the subjectivity of poor women beyond the economic realm. “Poor women also negotiate

\(^{277}\) Escobar 173.

\(^{278}\) Ibid. 188.
power, construct collective identities, and develop critical perspectives on the world in which they live,” Escobar notes, adding that the “struggle to put food in their mouths might entail cultural struggles.”279 In explicitly addressing questions of consciousness, the Shaheen Center prompts women’s critical reflection on their everyday world and encourages their contributions to collective life beyond their own ability to meet their basic needs.

The second unique feature of Shaheen is its structure as a community center. By focusing on one particular slum locality, Sultan Shahi, the Center is a temporal and spatial nexus that can foster cross-communal and cross-generational connections among women. Young women who came to the Center as adolescent girls are now staff people. Elementary school students who come in for tutoring pass by married women who are being counseled. Because of this exposure to the negotiation of the collective world at different stages of life, it is possible for girls and women to enrich mutually each other’s navigation of the gendered pathway of human development. Creating community-centered space for women also allows women to encounter their own religious diversity and to integrate religious difference into the pursuit of gender justice. In this particular Muslim feminist project, the struggles of Muslim women are gendered in such a way that they cannot be seen parochial concerns of incommensurably patriarchal religious culture. Instead, questions of women’s rights in Islam become cross-communal sites of feminist public action.

279 Ibid. 187.
The dynamic relationship between feminism and community in Shaheen shapes a unique space that enables gender to be a force of social cohesion in a slum polarized by communal violence. As a community center for poor women, Shaheen makes a place in Sultan Shahi for women that is not organized by the domesticity of the family or the instrumentality of the economy. By creating spaces in which women can speak and be heard, women can explore the possibility of “becoming a new type of social subject.” This dialogical space makes feminist contestation of patriarchal religious authority possible. It also reveals how the prescriptive and normative aspects of feminism interplay with its descriptive and exploratory aspects in terms of understanding women’s experiences. Girls and women can take advantage of the openness of the space at Shaheen and draw on the resources there for their own personal fulfillment. They have space to tell their story in expectation of a supportive response. Yet Shaheen has a clear mission and when necessary, it regulates the discursive culture of the Center so that it remains organized by that mission. The case of Sultana’s poetic invocation of Lashkar e-Toiba illustrates how normative claims regarding gender, religion, and violence are sustained by the feminist commitment to justice. Just as the formulation of Islamic law affects all women, so too does the possibility of Islamic terrorism. Jameela’s response to Sultana demonstrates the conscious effort to mark out a space for recognizing the mutual imbrication of a single life with the lives of others.

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280 Ibid. 188.
Chapter 5

Intersectionality and Religion:

Localizing Islam

The three Muslim poverty alleviation projects presented here use different approaches to redressing immiseration in India. The distinct form of each project studied results from choices made by organizers based on their own capacity, priorities, and interpretations of their immediate world. This chapter looks at the case study projects comparatively in order to demonstrate that poverty, and the attending concerns of gender and violence, compel the formation of local understandings of Islam. Drawing on feminist theory of intersectionality to conceptualize the complexity of the social world, I show that each of these projects emphasizes a unique way of bringing Islam to bear on the transformation of poverty. They do so by establishing distinct points of intersection between religion and the complex social forces that shape poverty. This religious dimension of intersectionality reveals how poverty localizes Islam, creating a bounded field of concern that frames the relationship of religion and society.

Intersectionality and Religion

The work of feminists of color in theorizing multiple aspects of identity in the United States can also be useful to understand the complexity of social life in contemporary India. In an effort to create a more nuanced understanding of gender given differences among women, feminist theorists of color have put forth the concept of
Intersectionality to express the way multiple subordinations can be experienced by women. The concept of intersectionality was initially proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw as a way of grasping the way multiple social forces of subordination shape “intersectional experience” that is “greater than the sum” of its parts.\textsuperscript{281} Intersectionality articulates that identities are not singular, but rather emerge from diverse social systems that structure race, class, gender, nationality, and religion. These “multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formation” shape experience as “multiplicative” rather than “additive.”\textsuperscript{282} Instead of thinking about each aspect of identity being an added layer upon an earlier layer, intersectionality explains that each aspect is “inextricably linked with another” and mutually influences the others.\textsuperscript{283}

At the experiential level, identity “occurs as a complex, synergistic, infused whole that becomes something completely different when parts are ignored, forgotten, and unnamed.”\textsuperscript{284} This sense of the wholeness of one’s identity can be elusive, given the propensity to frame others through one particular facet of identity and, for example, address race independently of gender, or religion independently of class. This simplistic framing diminishes the complexity of multiplying intersections. Poet Audre Lorde describes the effect of being “encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole” as “destructive and fragmenting,” yet in trying

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[283]{DeFrancisco 8.}
\footnotetext[284]{Ibid. 9}
\end{footnotes}
apprehend difference, the tendency to separate one aspect of identity becomes a common way of containing the potential of difference to overwhelm.\textsuperscript{285} Such fragmenting can lead to essentializing assumptions that people have “some predetermined, essential, or innate characteristics” by virtue of being born into a particular gender, race, or religion.\textsuperscript{286} As Angela Harris pithily states, “fragmentation of identity and essentialism go hand in hand.”\textsuperscript{287} In contrast to both fragmentation and essentialism, intersectionality conceptualizes the complexity of the social world by attempting to hold together the variety of systems and relations which structure subjects.

Within the field of women’s studies, scholars have approached the study of intersectionality in various ways. Sociologist Leslie McCall, who studies inequality in the United States, outlines three methods of studying intersectionality. McCall notes that “multiple, intersecting, and complex social relations” require that scholars “manage [the] complexity” of their subject of study.\textsuperscript{288} She delineates three approaches that “satisfy the demand for complexity” in the understanding of social life.\textsuperscript{289} The first approach is \textit{anticategorical complexity,} which “deconstructs analytical categories.”\textsuperscript{290} Within an anticategorical approach, “social life is considered too irreducibly complex – overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures – to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences.”\textsuperscript{291} McCall delineates a second approach to intersectionality as

\textsuperscript{285} Audrey Lorde, \textit{Sister/Outsider} (Berkeley, California: Crossing Press, 1984) 120.
\textsuperscript{286} DeFrancisco 9.
\textsuperscript{287} Quoted in DeFrancisco, p.9.
\textsuperscript{289} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{290} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{291} Ibid.
*intracategorical complexity*, in which a “focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection” allows a more finely detailed picture “of lived experience within such groups.”292 It was the recognition of “the limitation of gender as a single analytical category” that prompted women’s studies scholars of color to initiate explorations of intersectionality, and intracategorical complexity remains an object of study for feminist scholars.293 The third approach of *intercategorical complexity* involves the strategic use of “existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions.”294 Placed on a continuum, the first approach rejects the usefulness of analytical categories, the second approach “maintain a critical stance” towards them, and the third approach attempts to use such categories strategically.295 All of these approaches, McCall states, are helpful in order “to explore the complexity of intersectionality in social life.”296 Given multiple modes of subjected formation and multiple domains of social relations, each of these approaches provides a point of entry for understanding the complexity of social life.

The methodological approaches outlined by McCall can be usefully translated into analyses of religion in the three Muslim poverty alleviation projects discussed here. Although the concept of intersectionality comes out of feminist theory from the Western hemisphere, it can be equally helpful in exploring multiple modalities of social relations in the South Asian context, given the complex intersections of race, class, gender, caste,

292 Ibid. 1774.
293 Ibid. 1771.
294 Ibid. 1773.
295 McCall 1774.
296 Ibid. 1772.
ethnicity, religion, language, and regional differences that characterize Indian society. For Muslims in India, who are both a religious minority and a disproportionately large group in the demographic of poverty, the theoretical concept of intersectionality recognizes the complex social forces that structure their experience of inequality and subordination.

McCall’s description of approaches to intersectionality analyzes feminist scholarship, yet these distinct approaches can be usefully applied in analyzing the different ways that Muslims can draw on Islam in their efforts to counter poverty. Each of the three case study projects discussed here – the Zakat Trust, the Confederation of Voluntary Associations, and the Shaheen Center – recognizes the intersection of religion, poverty and gender in India. All three projects engage religion in the course of their efforts to alleviate poverty. The various approaches to intersectionality usefully illuminate the distinct way each project configures the relationship of religion and society, and allows us to see how the core problem of poverty occasions sites for diverse expression of Islam.

The Zakat Trust reconfigures one of the primary acts of piety in Islam, the giving of charity, in order to promote educational attainment. They attempt to shape ethical Muslim subjects by linking economic responsibility to resistance to cultural practices of gender immiseration such as dowry. Their efforts take Islam as an \textit{intercategorical} resource for confronting the entrenchment of poverty in India. Intercategorical approaches to social complexity use analytical categories to describe “relationships of inequality” that seem “stable, durable.”\textsuperscript{297} In the Indian context, religion constitutes a

\textsuperscript{297} Ibid. 1773.
primary dimension of social relations and a significant modality of subject formation. The Zakat Trust strategically uses the category of religion to counter poverty. Their discourse about the role of Muslims in contributing to Indian society recognizes the minority status of Indian Muslims and their poverty, while simultaneously encouraging their participation in the nation.

The Trust maintains that Islamic practices can redress inequality. As Muslims, they become patrons who focus on poor Muslim students, and then attempt to inculcate Islamic ethical sensibilities to counter poverty and rectify gender relations. In effect, they are marking out an intersectional space that can be transformed through Islam. Yet the transformation of dowry and other practices of gender immiseration does not merely serve social aims. The Trust presents charity, educational attainment, and dowry resistance as practices of what Islam teaches to be good and true. Islamic moral virtues can be applied within, but cannot be reduced to, Indian society. The Trust presents Islamic practices as a means of collective self-transformation of a poor, minority group. By transforming their own circumstances, Muslims can in turn transform society. Religion, in this project, is one of the categories that make up the complexity of the social world, but one that makes that same complexity bearable by making it a possible means of fulfillment.

As a large NGO, COVA sustains multiple programs in its attempts to counter poverty by linking development and social integration. Their effort to promote communal harmony together with economic opportunity constitutes a new form of social development in India. Their multifaceted efforts involve religion through a hybrid approach that is both antcategorical and intercategorical. Rather than figuring religion
through one primary approach, as is the case with the Zakat Trust, COVA engages alternating perspectives on religion. On some occasions, invocations of religion in COVA activities present religion as a force that stands outside of the multiple domains of social relations, a power that can be tapped in changing those relations. Religion, in these instances, is presented as something that supersedes the complexity of social life. Javed’s invocation of a liberative theological anthropology is one such instance of an anticategorical approach to religion. COVA does this by drawing on a universal and essentialized understanding of religion, one which simultaneously relativizes the claims of particularity of all religious traditions and the multiple forms of subject formation in society.

Yet religion is not engaged solely to deconstruct categories of sociality, as COVA alternates this supra-social engagement of religion with clear statements about the legitimacy of religion as a means of structuring society. By establishing relationships with religious authorities and institutions, COVA attempts to shape their influence towards its own vision of constructive social development. Whether through inter-faith forums, dialogues with leaders of local madrasas, street-theater performances, or joint celebrations of religious holidays, COVA’s activities move through the social architecture of religion in order to respond to suffering and alienation. In terms of managing social complexity, religion is both a resource that relativizes multiple modalities of subject formation and a key category for the rehabilitation of social relations. Religion is both the skeleton of the social body and the air it breathes. In that sense, COVA implicitly affirms the complexity of religion as something that can overcome the complexity of society.
The feminist project of the Shaheen Center creates a space for women and girls in the Sultan Shahi slum. As a community center, it attempts to not just meet the needs of women and girls to make their lives better, but to prompt reflection on their circumstances as gendered beings. Religion is engaged in Shaheen through gender, and within this intracategorical approach, it mirrors the dual prescriptive and descriptive dimensions of feminist understandings of gender. The intracategorical approach “maintains a critical stance” towards analytical categories, while still using them “to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection.” It explores the variety of experience within a given analytical category such as gender. Shaheen’s multiple engagements with religion are consistently framed by its concern with gender. Religion constitutes a site for contesting gender justice when its normative prescriptions contribute to women’s gender subordination, as can be seen in the Center’s organized protests against the nikahnama. Religion also offers symbolic resources and devotional repertoires that can be appropriated by women and girls throughout the course of their human development. Within this feminist community project, religion is critiqued or embraced as it fosters or inhibits the development of gender consciousness.

When the frame of gender shapes religious engagement even religious difference becomes an opportunity for understanding the diversity of women’s experiences. As a young woman on Shaheen’s staff, Sarita participated in protests against the nikahnama not because she, as a Hindu, had theological objections to Islamic personal law in India, but because she understood it to be one particular instance of the kind of patriarchal religious authority that supports women’s subordination. Such action and understanding

298 Ibid. 1774.
emerges from the construction of women’s space for the intracategorical engagement of religion.

Each of these different approaches to intersectionality satisfies the desire for complexity by accounting for multiple dimensions of social relations, and together they demonstrate the diversity of the religious dimension of Muslim poverty alleviation projects. It is significant that the Zakat Trust is the only of the three projects that can be described as having a solely intercategorical approach to Muslim poverty, drawing on Islamic tradition in order to improve the condition of Muslims in India. For both of the other cases, COVA and the Shaheen Center, the religious dimension of countering poverty requires something else besides an intercategorical approach. Both of these projects maintain that any improvement in the lives of poor Muslims must come through building relationships with people from other religious communities. This means that the two projects engage Islam while simultaneously engaging other religious traditions. COVA hybridizes the intercategorical engagement of local Islamic religious authority by also constructing religion as a universal social good, while Shaheen frames religious expression in terms of their overarching mission of promoting consciousness of gender subordination. All of the projects, however, situate religion in the very sites where poverty and violence are transformed.

Through different approaches, all of these Muslim poverty alleviation projects affirm the importance of engaging religion in redressing inequality. As people challenge poverty, they are required to reflect on complex social structures of immiseration, gender subordination, and religious co-existence. These projects present religion as a resource for managing the complexity of social life because religion figures as one point of entry
into the profoundly and irreducibly intersectional lives we lead. In all three projects, religion is presented in light of the need for co-existence, thus each project constructs religion as an encouragement for intersubjective life. The Trust links the domestic sphere of family life with broader patterns of poverty and gender discrimination; COVA posits that the wellbeing of Muslims is linked to trusting their religious Others; and Shaheen claims religion as a resource for the self-determination of women across religious boundaries. In each of these cases, religion intersects with the social world in such a way as to make particular social relations more dynamic and to orient specific modes of subject formation towards the possibilities of intersubjectivity. While intersectionality conceptualizes the complex processes that produce difference, inequality, and poverty in society, religion articulates specific instances of intersubjective connection that can counter fragmentation and dehumanization. In other words, the invocation of religion in these projects sustains people confronting poverty because religion helps people to experience the complexity of social life as complex, and not chaotic or capricious or cruel.

Localizing Islam

As Muslims identify potential changes in social relations that can redress social fragmentation and inequality, poverty occasions the localization of Islam. By creating experimental spaces for alleviating poverty and by constructing religion as a resource for managing the complexity of social life, Muslims in Hyderabad participate in the ongoing realization of Islam in everyday life. Projects to redress poverty thus dynamically reflect and shape local understandings of Islam. Because they address the exigencies of poverty in the immediate environment, their inherently local focus frames Islam as it can be
brought to bear on critical sites of social transformation. Through this process, the local becomes both an expressive and a generative dimension of Islamic tradition. Rather than understanding the local as a diminished scale of a greater whole, the local constitutes a crucial domain of lived religion, a vibrant field in which ways of being Muslim are contested, embodied, and engaged. In the Muslim anti-poverty projects discussed here, the local frames the ongoing creative expression of Islamic traditions. These projects shape modes of belonging to others, and as they work to inhibit the formation of zones of social sacrifice, they simultaneously construct nonviolent social practices as expressions of local Islam.

In postcolonial Islamic studies, the concept of the local marks a shift between different levels of religious inquiry. For Islamic studies, the local has done the tremendous theoretical work of integrating the study of popular and vernacular devotional practices with textual and legal studies. Particularly in the period following the publication of Clifford Geertz’s *Islam Observed*, cultural studies of local Islam allowed new explorations of the cultural diversity of Islamic traditions, and broadened the paradigmatic understanding of Islam, exemplified by Marshall Hodgson, as a tradition framed by the fertile tension between revelation and historical context.\(^{299}\) In this vein, the local references devotional practices and popular religiosity, including many clusters of ‘little traditions’ that contrast with ‘The Great Tradition’ of Islamic textual and scholarly religious authority. “Both forms of Islam – the formal, textual and the pragmatic and local – coexist in a state of tension,” each making unique contributions to

the experience of Islam. These two domains within Islamic studies have been methodologically marked out such that anthropology deals with culture, devotion, lived religion, and diversity, while theology emerges from the study of discourse and texts that are seen to provide historical integrity and transcultural coherence. By investigating liminal modes of religious devotion, the local reveals the processes of legitimation through which certain practices become signified (or not) as Islamic. This dualistic paradigm accounts for the tremendous cultural diversity of Islamic practice, but also runs the risk of privileging patriarchal scholarly religious authority when local practices are seen as syncretistic dilutions of a purer, truer, more real, and authentic Islam.

Another use of the local in Islamic studies is in contrast with the global. The local and the global are understood as different domains of territoriality, as can be seen in studies of contemporary transnational movements such as global Sufi orders, Islamist organizations, and terrorist networks. In this view, the local becomes the specific, bounded manifestation of translocal phenomena, or, alternately, the local can circumscribe the global, placing limits on unbounded movements of ideas, people, and practices. Between the local and the global, there is the possibility of an additional national scale, which can also limit or instantiate the other two scales. When the local and global are related in this way, “ideas of scale” are activated in order to trace connections.

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300 Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld, Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation and Conflict (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004) vxi.
302 Ahmad xv.
between ideas and events, on the one side, and their effects and interpretations on the other.\footnote{Veena Das, \textit{Life and Words}, 158.}

The understanding of the local used here draws on aspects common to other anthropological studies of contemporary Islam, while also adding an emphasis on the local as a field of situational creativity for engaging Islam. Following Arjun Appadurai’s notion of “the local as a structure of affect,” the case studies considered here draw on the local as a way of imagining the continuity of belonging in social life.\footnote{Arjun Appadurai, \textit{Modernities at Large}, cited in Das, ibid.} All three of these projects understand their efforts as carrying on important social traditions of Indian Muslim life, even as they experiment with new forms of their articulation. The understanding of resonances in physics provides a useful metaphor for understanding this sense of the local. In physics, systems have different inherent modes of resonance depending on their boundary conditions. Complex systems with complex boundary conditions produce multiple frequencies of resonance. Each of these multiple resonances are unique; some of them are coherent, and some of them are dissonant and incoherent. Imagining the local as a complex system, these projects produce the boundary conditions that make specific religious resonances coherent in a social sense.

The case studies under consideration are all contemporary projects, emerging in post-Babri Masjid India, yet they each continue and adapt distinctly local Muslim social traditions. The Zakat Trust is an autonomous organization that is not affiliated with any larger organized piety movement. As noted earlier, however, it draws on pre-existing models of elite patronage of social welfare institutions that are emerged in Hyderabad
during the earlier part of the twentieth century, when family members of the ruling nizam established hospitals and schools. The efforts of the Zakat Trust to counter dowry as a practice of immiseration also have historic precedent in Indian Muslim history. During the earlier part of the twentieth century, prior to Independence, Indian ‘ulama’ were “confronted with mass poverty, social inequalities, and widespread discrimination.”

While Muslim clerics were not the only ones to tackle social problems, which as issues of widespread concern were also taken up by counter-colonial movements, they made formal pronouncements against exorbitant wedding and funeral expenses, asking and giving bride money, borrowing loans on interest, and sectarian enmities. Volunteers for the Zakat Trust are not clerics, yet they do continue a long-standing practice of tackling pressing social problems by articulating Islamic moral virtues to counter problematic cultural practices. They do so, however, with a markedly different approach in that they link these issues to the transformation of gender discrimination, something which was not an explicit priority for earlier Indian Muslim social reformists.

COVA explicitly assumes the mantle of carrying on local tradition, taking on an almost custodial role in protecting cultural repertoires of composite social life. Like many Indian Muslims throughout modern history, they have a vision of “an overriding common destiny for all groups in India.” The viability of this traditional vision of communal harmony is joined to the contemporary effort to redress urban poverty and empower slum dwellers to transform their circumstances. In their episodic invocations of religion, they re-animate this tradition through performance and discourse. To a certain extent, the

305 Reetz 296.
306 Ibid. 297.
307 Ibid. 38.
intelligibility of COVA’s presentation of religion, particularly in terms of its specific claims about the universality of religion, draws on Indian boundary-crossing devotional modes that have deep historical roots. Both in terms of vernacular poetry and in terms of practices associated with saints’ shrines, the logic of devotion in Indian history sustains a religious imaginary that is not only comfortable with religiously ambiguous space, but also places a high value on the ability to overcome sectarian differences in the course of religious experience. As COVA locates itself in the interstices between religious and secular institutions, and articulates multiple religious discourses that mingle what is Islamic with what is broadly religious, they implicitly draw on the comfort with permeable boundaries that has characterized some practices of religion in India.

The Shaheen Center, as the third case study, combines some of the same local traditions that inform the Zakat Trust and COVA within a uniquely feminist approach. Like the Zakat Trust, the Shaheen Center furthers the concerns of earlier Muslim social reformers, as they also see education as a key strategy to counter the suffering of poverty and discrimination. And like COVA, the Shaheen Center values the composite tradition of devotion that has shaped the landscape of religion in India. These traditions are grasped through feminist hermeneutics, such that education becomes an issue of gender justice for girls, and the devotional mode becomes a source for a gendered imaginary of empowerment. Religious border crossing in Indian devotional practices at saints’ shrines

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often involves the renegotiation of gender boundaries as well, and the Shaheen Center understands the practices of religious devotion in India as a gendered tradition that offers special religious benefits to women negotiating their subordination.

Each of these projects localizes Islam, articulating Indian Muslim social traditions in response to poverty in contemporary Hyderabad. They participate in uniquely Indian Muslim social traditions, creatively refiguring the historical patterns that continue to shape local ways of being Muslim. In so doing, poverty alleviation projects become part of the renewal of Indian Muslim culture, resituating local understandings of Islam within new social spaces which differ from the traditional institutional, organizational, and devotional forms that have been the prominent features of modern Indian Muslim history.

These projects are local in comparison with global social movements, but also in terms of politics and scope. Unlike the political mobilization of religion in Islamist parties and organizations in South Asia or the Middle East that attempt to assert power over the state, these projects address the political in terms of local democracy, encouraging communities to participate in elections and use their influence to shape public policy so that it improves their material conditions. COVA facilitates nonformal adult education programs about democratic processes in order to enable people living in slums to use existing political processes to get improved access to food rations, water, sanitation, and public security. The Shaheen Center also holds such democracy education programs. In contrast to political Islamism, the political dimensions of these projects are organized in terms of local poverty and local democracy, as a way of helping poor people

meet their needs. In terms of scope, as well, the focus on redressing poverty gives a centripetal force of localization as these projects arise from commitments to improving the lives of people living in Sultan Shahi slum, the Old City of Hyderabad, and the state of Andhra Pradesh. While COVA does link community-based organizations through statewide networks, the focus of all three projects remains local. This is not a limitation of scope as much as a formation of boundaries through which lived social relations can become subject to reflection and experimentation.

Muslim anti-poverty projects are emergent public spaces for engaging Islam. They do not fit into dominant models of Islamic social action, which emphasize Islamist politics, mass social organizations, national or transnational reformist movements, and extremist violence. Hirschkind’s notion of an ‘Islamic counterpublic’ helpfully describes the extension of religious contestations about piety in the contemporary context of Egypt and the consolidation of Islamism. Rather than expanding arenas of argumentation about Islamic piety as such, as Hirschkind describes the counterpublic, these projects bring Islamic ideas to bear in spaces formally dedicated to poverty relief. They attempt to formulate public discourse about Islam and create spaces for conversation about how Muslims engage collective wellbeing in the face of suffering. Such projects are also not easily mapped through existing forms of devotional life in India, in which the sacred spaces of Sufism and the historic influence of madrasa education stand as two poles shaping the tremendous heterogeneity of Islam in India. What these projects demonstrate

is that the commitment to redress local poverty has generated new public forms of sociality, in which the elaboration of wellbeing depends on invocations of Islam.

One final sense of the local seen in projects to redress poverty is that the local is a necessary domain of nonviolence. These projects are post-Babri Masjid projects: they emerged in the wake of Hindu-Muslim violence as efforts to heal victims. They all have their genesis in the responses to the effects of violence that wrought incalculable human damage. In Hyderabad, where riots raged in the slums of the Old City, most of the victims were poor people. As they continually grapple with the social consequences of riots, including the fear of the ongoing irruption of riots, their focus on helping the victims was sustained by efforts to transform poverty. The projects attempt to confront the structural violence that produces poverty through multiple strategies, ranging from empowering youth to make ethical choices regarding their professional preparation, to promoting the value of social integration, to educating people about their democratic rights. These efforts redress “already existing structural inequalities” which make “everyday life full of perils.” The “ubiquity” of structural violence is related to ongoing threat of extreme violence in the form of riots, as the “everyday provide[s] the grounds from which” such violence could be produced. Riots, as Das notes, are “made out of the local in significant ways.” Countering violence in the domain of the everyday requires transforming the cultural context through nonviolence, which, it is hoped, will act to check more extreme violent events. Because violence is a lived experience of intensified damage in the immediate lifeworld, nonviolence is intrinsically

311 Das 149.
312 Ibid.
313 Ibid.
local, marking out a domain of protection and belonging that can only emerge in lived human relationships.

Echoing through these projects is a desire to escape the specter of violent globalized Islamic extremism. The day-to-day lifeworld of Muslims throughout India and across the city of Hyderabad is impinged upon by terrorism and the war on terror. All of these projects grapple with the ways that everyday Muslim lives intersect with the global reality of extremist violence. This concern is given voice by volunteers of the Zakat Trust who want to see Muslims immunize themselves from global terrorism by transforming their communities into models of bourgeois rectitude and propriety. When local extremists influence the everyday frames of reference in Sultan Shahi, Shaheen Center staff foster consciousness among women about the impact on all women of (what in South Asia has still been largely male-dominated) violent religious extremism. As part of COVA, men and women place their bodies in between perpetrators and victims of local violence because they believe that tacit acceptance of violence in any Muslim community contributes to the Islamophobic stereotyping of all Muslims as violent. Given that local violence and global violence mutually imbricate each other, promoting nonviolence in local domains counters multiple modalities of violence that cause human damage.

Nonviolence informs the Muslim projects considered here, standing as the implicit aim and social logic of their activities. The desire to counter violence prompted their formal organization, when efforts to tackle structural inequalities compelled the emergence of new public projects, as noted earlier. The explicit purpose of these projects remains redressing poverty, and promoting a culture of nonviolence is instrumental towards this primary goal. The construction of new visions, activities, ethics, spaces,
discourses, and performances demonstrates the continual effort required to transform poverty and inequality. Das notes that “violence creates divisions and connections that point to the tremendous dangers that human beings pose to each other,” but in addition to posing danger, “humans also hold hope for each other.” Chronicling the experiences of people who lived through riots that targeted Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, she explains “by addressing the theme of social suffering, I try to show in my depiction of ordinary lives that the answer to these dangers is not some kind of an ascent into the transcendent but a descent into everyday life.” Responses to social suffering cannot always be ascribed to the bifurcated choice between ascending into transcendence or descending into everyday life, as these projects demonstrate. There are alternate religious hermeneutics that locate transcendence within society, and that give rise to compelling idioms of belonging as religion becomes inflected in the struggle against poverty. Notions of the sacred, including sacred history, spirit, and religious ethics can play a crucial role in the lives of those confronting social suffering. Further, when the domain of the everyday is also the domain of ubiquitous structural violence, the descent into the ordinary can be an ambivalent combination of the comfort of the familiar with the tragic limitation of resignation. What these projects do, instead, is to mark out distinct spaces for people to reflect on and reconfigure everyday sociality, and thus signal the possibility of experience beyond suffering. To do this, they consciously mark off social spaces in order to present them as shared: given social complexity and fragmentation, they do not assume that people experience social space as being the “same social space,” and all of these projects make concerted and conscious efforts to give people a sense that their world is shared,

314 Das 14, 15.
315 Ibid.
held in common, and therefore is the “same” world for others.\textsuperscript{316} They do not, as can be seen, form the sense of the world as shared in the same way, alternately emphasizing bonds between women, across religious communities, within and beyond families. Yet the quality of sharedness obtains throughout, and this intersubjective perception of the world is presented as affording a pathway out of suffering.

The Zakat Trust, the Shaheen Center, and the Confederation of Voluntary Associations are local projects initiated by Muslims to counter endemic poverty in Muslim communities. These emergent projects, experimenting with how traditions of Islam inform the struggle against poverty, fall between prevailing models of Islamic sociality, but they make significant contributions to our understanding of “how Islam has historically been experienced and observed by its adherents.”\textsuperscript{317} As an aspect of lived religion, poverty helps us apprehend the diversity of Islam. Local responses to poverty reveal some of the forces that shape the heterogeneity of Islam, for even within one city – albeit a large one – these projects involve diverse religious hermeneutics, gender analyses, and social ethics. Speaking about African-Americans in the context of the United States, Sherman Jackson claims that “if Islam is to retain concrete meaning in the everyday lives of Blackamerican Muslims, it will have to continue to show its ability to address the concrete circumstances that inform and circumscribe their lives.”\textsuperscript{318}

Translating this observation into the South Asian context, these projects demonstrate that,

\textsuperscript{316} Das and Kleinman, \textit{Violence and Subjectivity}, 2.
for some Muslims, Islam remains a powerful inspiration for challenging the concrete circumstances of poverty.

When these projects are included in analyses of contemporary Muslim societies, they nullify sweeping generalizations about the intrinsic ‘culture of poverty’ or ‘culture of violence’ in Islam. What we see, instead, is the creative determination of Muslims to push back against the forces of poverty so that which binds people to everyday life is something other than violence, subordination, fragmentation, deprivation, and suffering. The desire to constitute the world aside from the negation of being is, in many respects, the emergence of wellbeing in both individuals and groups. This challenges any lingering Orientalist visions of Islamic cultural stagnation. Yet it also challenges the self-understanding of Muslims in the context of contemporary India. Historically, and in the contemporary period as well, “powerful pluralist visions have shaped Muslim communities in India and elsewhere.” However, within the current climate of heightened Hindu-Muslim communalism, and “powerful and growing anti-Muslim sentiments in the West, in India, and elsewhere,” those Muslims who attempt to critique social practices and structures “struggle to gain wider acceptance for alternative ways of imagining Islam within the wider Muslim community.” For those who do engage this struggle, shaping social relations amongst Muslims, amongst women, amongst those who are poor, between Muslims and those of other religions, between women and men, and between those who are on one side of poverty and those who are on the other side, promises a future in which the primary mode of being is not formed through negation and

319 Hassan 5.
320 Sikand 299.
dehumanization. There is risk in that, for there is no single solution to poverty in all of its complex material, cultural, social, political, and religious dimensions. It presents a profound human challenge. When poverty is taken as the given condition of an individual or group or culture, it is hard to get sufficient traction to change it. When it is denaturalized, it can be recognized for what it is: the created product of human relations.

The process of localization marks out the social field as a space of action and creativity within human relations. These projects are dynamic and experimental, responding to the contingencies of suffering and the possibilities for wellbeing: the people and projects described here do not have answers. What they do have are strategies that come out of and develop their understanding of what it means to be Muslim. In sustaining these experimental projects, Muslim antipoverty efforts bring into being communities of care in which people form, or try to form, affective bonds with others to sustain their collective welfare. That they do so in very different ways through very different forms attests to both the complexity of social suffering and the creativity and stamina involved in countering it.

As these projects encourage reflection on and reconstruction of social relations as a practice of care, they articulate how their efforts express Islam. They elaborate how their specific strategies of countering poverty reaffirm bestowals of Islam: human dignity, moral capacity, mutual support and celebration, and peacemaking. Such articulation in contemporary projects allows us to see specific instances in the production and recreation of Islamic tradition in social space: these projects are not theologico-legal institutions, nor are they mystical practices. Their efforts to counter the suffering of poverty by marking out the possibility of wellbeing in relation to others reflects the
Qur’anic understanding of humanity as both free and finite, endowed with the capacity “to rise above the limits of the ‘given’” towards an open future.\textsuperscript{321}

Bibliography


