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'Exist, endure, erase the city' (*Sheher mein jiye, is ko sahe, ya ise mitaye?*): Child vigilantes and micro-cultures of urban violence in a riot-affected Hyderabad slum

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Abstract

Hyderabad, a city in southern India, has witnessed a saga of religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims, the first large-scale riot being recorded in 1939. As recently as March 2010, paramilitary forces were deployed to rein in extensive clashes over the appropriate placing of religious flags across the city. Along this convoluted history of religious discord, the rapidly growing slum areas of Hyderabad became receptacles not just of poverty, but radical politics and unrest. This essay interrogates the violent identity politics embraced by riot-affected Muslim male children in a communally volatile slum in Hyderabad, and explores why these boys turned to armed and collective vigilantism to position themselves in a landscape of death, destruction and urban displacement.

Keywords

violence, vigilantism, slum, urban anthropology, Hyderabad

19 September 2005, Hyderabad: Arshed, 10, a slum child from the old city and a member of his local vigilante group, craned his neck to admire the sun shining off a glass building in Hi-Tech City, a new technology township, in Hyderabad, currently described as 'Cyberabad' in the local and international media. '*Sheher agey*

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nikal gayi, hum tow piche rehe gaye, wohi danga fasaad, wohi garibi [the city has run ahead, we are left behind, the same riots, the same poverty]', he said glibly to the anthropologist. '*Phir bhi, basti mein hamari fauj ki qadar hain* [At least our patrols are respected in the slums].'

Deccan Chronicle, 29 March 2010, Hyderabad: A dispute over the placing of religious flags in public places led to large-scale rioting in Hyderabad city today. There have been several reports of deaths, over a hundred people were critically injured, almost 200 people were arrested for rioting and destroying property, 20 police stations clamped a curfew in their areas and paramilitary forces were deployed to control the rioting in some parts of the city. The residents of riot-torn areas felt 'Cyberabad' should be re-named as 'curfew city'.

This essay explores the street actions and familial dynamics of impoverished slum boys operating as violent collective units on the ground. It highlights the ways in which riot-affected male children, living at the periphery of mainstream economic life in an urban centre in India, made aggressive attempts to claim and control communally tense public spaces for the safety and mobility of poor children (between 2003 and 2008). My ethnographic focus is on Sultanpur, a Muslim-dominated slum in the northern quarters of Hyderabad, marked by decades of communal antagonisms between Hindus and Muslims. According to the slum dwellers, the long-established exclusionary politics of the prominent local Hindu community had subdued poor Muslims, and radical Hindu politicians had continually sustained a terse, volatile environment even during post-riot reconstructive phases. In 2003, after a breakdown in peace talks and a burst of rioting in Sultanpur, the disgruntled voices of Muslim slum boys (aged between nine and 14 years), became audible in intercommunity meetings and informal family gatherings; the boys overtly expressed their resentment against Hindu majoritarianism. Instead of relying on family members, community leaders and local organizations for implementing security measures on the streets, these boys initiated group vigilante activities to protect and patrol the borders of riot-affected Muslim localities. Over the next five years, the young vigilantes emerged as self-styled retribution armies, and attempted to control both the internal and external dynamics of slum areas. The boys' squads, for example, not only policed public spaces, they also attacked 'deviant' Muslim slum women for flirting with Hindu men, or attacked traders for establishing business links with 'enemy' communities. In 2008, the Indian government issued nationwide terror alerts after attacks by alleged Pakistani extremists in south Mumbai.¹ In an atmosphere of heightened suspicion and distrust against Muslim communities, the power and presence of organized Muslim children on the streets made the local authorities in Sultanpur deeply uncomfortable. The child squads were brought under excessive police surveillance and eventually disbanded. This essay uses an ethnographic lens to capture the short life of the child squads and show how their practices upturned, however temporarily, affective relations and structures of authority in an urban slum. I argue that multiple experiences of urban alienation (poverty, social and physical attacks on poor children, the disintegration of the family, loss of community pride, etc.),

etched in relief against a long history of communal discord in India, generated an aggressive child identity politics, which eventually located communally fragmented slums as receptacles for new micro-cultures of urban violence.

For the boys in my study, the city was ‘war’ (*yeh sheher ek jung hain*). My narrative uses words like ‘soldiers’ (*sepahi*) and ‘war’ (*ladai/yudh*), instead of gangs and vigilantism, primarily because the children used these categories to position themselves in their impression and imagination of an urban ‘war-scape’.

‘Never seen anything like this before’: Gritty urban histories and the rise of child militancy

In 2005–2006, I was invited by a collaboration of academics and NGOs in Hyderabad to carry out fieldwork in a slum based in the old city (which I call Sultanpur).² I had prior experience of conducting research with cliques of violent Hindu children in the ghettos of suburban Bombay, and members of the collaborative group felt I was suitable for exploring a similar phenomenon in a Muslim-dominated slum in another metropolis. When in Bombay, I stumbled across nascent child vigilantes during my doctoral fieldwork in a slum, where a cluster of Hindu nationalist organizations dictated the nature of everyday social and economic life (Sen, 2007). In the northern quarters of Hyderabad, however, local NGO workers guided me to riot-torn Sultanpur where child hostilities had already grown roots. Despite being a Hindu (not a local one), Muslim slum dwellers in Sultanpur offered me shelter, access to resources and discussion time. Through sharing their daily concerns I discovered how the families and extended kin networks of violent male children were keen to discover the rationale of child vigilantism.

‘Sultanpur has never seen anything like this before’, said Rafiq (41) who had been warned by the male child squads to terminate trade links with non-community members. Most slum dwellers like Rafiq told me how they had protected Sultanpur’s relatively well-designed by-lanes through the years of religious tensions. The slum covered several *mohallas* (neighbourhood subdivisions) and was located close to the Charminar, an iconic 16th-century monument and a popular tourist spot in the city. Most of Sultanpur’s 30,000 Urdu-speaking inhabitants³ were artisans and small merchants who had lived in the area for several generations. Even though slum dwellers complained about the lack of social mobility, they were evidently proud of their skills and ran shanty shops (selling bangles, veils, glass artefacts, pearls, jewellery, etc.) in the bazaars thriving on arterial roads around the Charminar.⁴ Pockets of Sultanpur were also dominated by unlawful traders, referred to locally as ‘sultans of the night’; the latter ran businesses in drugs, flesh, crude arms and spurious goods. However, the hierarchies between legal and illegal trade remained contested; for example, legal printers selling counterfeit bank notes on the side felt morally superior to full-time local pimps. Several illegal businessmen were also kind money-lenders and donors to the prominent local mosques. Legal traders and criminal kingpins kept the police and tax

authorities well bribed; thus most members of the state machinery overlooked discrepancies in the social and fiscal economy of Sultanpur. But in Sultanpur, 'chor, chowkidaar, churiwallah [thief, constable, bangle-seller] would say *salaam* to an elderly person', said Rafiq. He remained concerned that the riots had destroyed *nawabi* (Islamic/imperial) forms of respect and authority, especially among the children.

Through Hyderabad's historical journey (from being an Islamic state under the rule of a Nizaam, to its annexation by a Hindu-dominated post-colonial Indian state),⁵ the city has seen and survived the ebbing and flowing of communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. The Charminar area in the old city particularly bore the brunt of this onslaught. Since the invasion of Hyderabad by the Indian army in 1948, communal polarizations in electoral politics became acute as pan-Indian Hindu nationalist groups such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) infiltrated into Muslim-owned old city neighbourhoods and pitched themselves against local Islamic groups, particularly the Majlis⁶ (Khalidi, 1988). Rumour-mongering (Kakar, 2005), communalized electioneering (Engineer, 1991), strategic post-partition influx of Hindu refugees⁷ (Alam, 1994) and migration from low-caste Hindu rural areas (Säävälä, 2001) were significant factors that impacted inter-community relations. Between 1978 and 1984, Hyderabad saw communal riots sparked off by issues ranging from a Muslim woman being raped in a police station to differences over the immersion of idols during Hindu festivals. During the course of this conflict, slums in the Charminar constituency turned into 'hyperghettoes' (Wacquant, 2007) and were reorganized along communal lines. In 1992, when Hindu nationalists made their first attempt to tear down the Babri Masjid in the temple town of Ayodhya in north India (claiming that the historical mosque was the site for the birth of a mythological Hindu god, Ram), Hyderabad witnessed over a fortnight of crippling riots. According to Naidu (1990), communal incitement in the Charminar constituency worsened with the increasing lack of state control – especially over religious processions through sensitive areas, and the subsequent lifting of a ban on loudspeakers, which increased the scope for venomous speeches. In Sultanpur, slum dwellers grumbled how quotidian battles between Hindu and Muslim residents over civic amenities would escalate into violent brutalities. In 2003, when local Hindus tried to restrict Muslim residents from publicly marking the 10th anniversary of the destruction of the mosque, Sultanpur suffered a significant bout of rioting, including a number of child deaths. In 2007, a pipe-bomb blast near the Mecca Masjid followed by serial blasts near the Charminar killed several residents of Sultanpur, which intensified the religious blame game between the BJP and the Majlis.⁸ In March 2010, public discontent over the location of religious flags sparked off large-scale rioting in the old city, underlining yet again the precariousness of communal relations in Hyderabad.

The local residents (and various NGO workers active in Sultanpur) suggested to me that 'child soldiering' (*fauji bacche/sepahi bacche* as the children chose to call themselves) was a consequence of communal antagonisms in the Charminar constituency. According to an NGO report,⁹ there was a turn in the nature of rioting in

the 1990s when Hindu mobs began to target Muslim male children; there were several cases of Muslim boys being maimed or killed with swords, spears and stones, and hung from doorways to send a message to enemy communities (1998 COVA report, 14–15). The children in Sultanpur appeared to be profoundly aware of these forms of persecutory practices. Sarkar (2002), in her research on the torture of Muslim children in the city of Ahmedabad (during the 2002 Hindu–Muslim riots in Gujarat, a state in western India), argues that this trend, to slaughter young Muslim males, stems from myths around Muslim sexual virility, multiple marriage practices and subsequent Hindu anxieties about the quick reproduction of Muslim male children. Hence the latter were specifically murdered during communal unrest to obliterate the continuity of a minority community. During my stay in Sultanpur, slum dwellers informed me that witnessing child deaths in the 2003 riots in the Charminar area had prompted sections of riot-affected male children to establish surveillance teams in the area, and their numbers had grown rapidly over a period of two years. At first, community leaders (which comprised elderly traders) had overlooked this phenomenon, since children parading around in groups to protect themselves came across as the ‘normal’ fallout of confronting communal conflict. Over time, however, the number of boy squads mushroomed. The children developed strategies for recruitment, acquired arms and exercised direct violence on people and property (even within the slum); these activities brought issues of acceptance or outrage over child violence to the forefront of community debates in the locality.

While in Sultanpur, I attempted to grasp the politics of squad formations by drawing out the personal narratives of local children. When I asked Arshed why he got mobilized into vigilantism, he (aided by his vigilante friend) constructed this story:

Arshed: In December 2003, riots broke out. I was sent off for safe-keeping to my uncle’s house in another part of the city. My brother, a six-year-old, remained behind as my parents were sure that a small child could be hidden in a box if the situation became rough. I returned to the slums after a few weeks and found my mother sitting at the doorstep of our shack; she had a glazed look and held her head in her hands. My father sat on a creaky bed, swaying from side to side and whispering ‘he is gone, he is gone [*chala gaya, chala gaya*]’. My neighbour walked up to me, put his hand on my shoulder and said ‘come and say goodbye to your brother’. He walked with me to the cemetery. He said my brother got struck on the head when trapped between rioters on the streets, and finally succumbed to his injuries after two days. The neighbour pointed towards a freshly covered grave. When I bent over and touched the earth my hand got caught in the stringed net of flowers resting over the grave. My small brother was tugging at my arm. My uncle said, ‘You are all that your parents have right now, you will grow up and be their crutch.’ I said, ‘Let me grow up first.’

Ahmed (15), vigilante friend: I had heard about Arshed’s return to the slum. That evening I asked him to join our vigilante group. Without offering a word of consolation to his grieving parents, Arshed came to meet us. He was very strong. One of the

older boys gave Arshed a crude sword. I remember the boy had said: 'For your self-protection' [*tere suraksha ke liye*].

Arshed: Didn't look back after that [*peeche mudke na dekha*].

While chatting with several other boys about forming child squads, I discovered that their initial 'decisions' were often related to fear of death and displacement: fears that centred around myths and realities of children dying in riots, their souls being trapped between heaven and hell, what it meant to castrate a community through killing male heirs, and attending post-riot funerals. Several children were afraid of being separated from their families, sent off to the villages, being taken out of school, and living with injuries inflicted during the riots.¹⁰ By the time I had started research in Sultanpur, public memory about who *exactly* initiated this system of child vigilantism had become vague. Most of the adults blamed boys from other families for having 'sown the seed of violence' in the minds of their own vulnerable children. None of the boys clearly remembered 'the first guys' who came out on the streets as child patrols (they were also not forthcoming about offering glory to one squad over another), but most of them recollected being incited by a friend, a brother or an acquaintance to join the gangs. '*Tere suraksha ke liye* [for your own safety]', was a key phrase used by all the children.

Witch-hunting women, cautioning men: Boys' vigilantism and retributive justice

Slum dwellers felt that despite encounters with unpredictability and violence, in Sultanpur, 'children used to be children [*bacche to bacche the*]'. While girls usually had limited mobility and more domestic tasks, most boys attended local educational institutions run by faith-based organizations (FBOs), NGO schemes and city corporations. Male children were encouraged to learn family trades and supported their real or foster parents in their work. Almost all the boys were involved in casual crime, such as stealing wallets, ferrying lightweight illegal goods and selling marijuana, which were rarely reprimanded by community elders. Some of the boys also worked as unskilled labourers for an additional income. Most members of the community expressed nostalgia for this ideal male childhood lost to communal violence when boys laughed and played with mates, balanced work and studies, maintained hygiene and religious values, stole a cigarette break, and importantly, respected elders. 'Look at them now', said Aiyaz, a slum dweller, sadly pointing his finger towards a patrol of grim-looking children roaming the street.

During my stay in the Sultanpur slum, I interacted closely with approximately 15 local child squads with memberships of 10–12 children. The members of a particular 'child army' usually lived on the same lane; however, boys often moved between the cliques depending on shifting friendships, and playing common games such as cricket, football, carom and flying kites. Each child squad in Sultanpur 'guarded all things precious in the territory'. Their everyday

activities included policing the streets, pelting stones at Hindu neighbours, watching over the mosques, escorting each other to school and work, and swiftly drawing out crude weapons in crowded spaces to shock people into recognizing the presence of the patrols. 'These are the same streets where we were abused as *basti ke gande bacche* [dirty kids from the slum], now people step aside to let us pass', said Alam (11). On some days, the squads went around acquiring arms, including expensive guns, which piqued my curiosity. After weeks of prodding, the boys unwillingly introduced me to some strategies used by them to 'get a gun' in Sultanpur. The children working as informal labourers often saved enough money to buy a cheap gun in instalments (costing Rupees 8000 without bullets, and Rupees 10,000 with a pack of six bullets) from a local dealer; some boys helped in stacking boxes in illegal warehouses and were gifted a gun by owners of weapons storage units; the boys who did drug drops were usually given a hired gun for self-protection. Local businessmen also bought or borrowed country-made pistols for protecting shops, homes and their women, especially during the riots. These guns were stolen or snatched away by their vigilante children. Abdullah (12) even pointed to the local police station as the source of guns. He said: 'I mop floors at the station and simply steal the guns from unlocked weapons vaults. No one ever cares or counts.' Some local dealers sold flat, compact guns to the children, which allowed shorter boys to carry lightweight ammunition (in addition to sticks and swords). While talking to some other boys about the hazards of stabbing people from close range, Alam (14) said, 'Smaller children feel relieved to be able to shoot from a distance without having to physically overpower larger opponents.'

All though the children preferred to openly tour the streets, they often huddled in street corners to coordinate their activities: how to plan an attack and how to popularize vigilantism. To carry on these conversations and yet escape the afternoon sun, several child squads had their own clandestine hideouts. Partially sheltered from public view, these hideouts (in abandoned buildings and shanties, and unoccupied parts of warehouses) would simultaneously act as a weapons workshop and a gathering ground for the local boys. Some of them would exchange food, smokes and information 'off the street', while others simply napped. Most of the children touched and toyed around with empty guns, and took turns in making crude swords (usually by hammering extended wooden grips on to large kitchen knives). The boys who had developed sewing expertise through family trade would squat and stitch secret pockets on to shirts and trousers, mainly to carry small arms. Some children would simply remain silent. Many months into my stay in Sultanpur, the boys admitted that these moments of quiet camaraderie were real meaningful exchanges among the children, rather than empty mobilizational speeches: smiles of admiration and slapping of shoulders articulated greater comfort in comradeship. These street corners and hideouts, thus, acted both as a resting and nesting place for children tired of 'being out on the streets'.

On several days of the week, the hideouts acted as informal courts where the children took collective decisions about retributive justice against 'deviant members' of the slum community. For example, boy squads in Sultanpur set up

surveillance teams to spy on local women who had affairs with Hindu men living in the Charminar area. According to Salima (39), a local Muslim henna artist, she had been 'punished' for one such transgression.

On a summer afternoon, she stepped out of her small shack to meet with her Hindu lover, Mohan, a shopkeeper, who often took her for an evening walk. Despite the evident disapproval of her neighbours, she carried on her affair ensuring that she returned home before dark to cook for her children. Abandoned by her alcoholic father at a young age and later by her abusive husband, Salima raised her two sons by eking out a small living. She had felt grateful that her boys had survived years of riots, curfews and clampdowns. While stopping to adjust her dress at the edge of the slum, Salima found herself surrounded by a group of agitated local boys, including her two sons. The boys began to throw stones at her while loudly accusing her of sleeping with 'the enemy'. Salima keeled over and fell on the ground when the boys began to physically assault her with kicks and blows to her chest and stomach. While lying in a foetal position in the dust, Salima gaped in horror at her foul-mouthed sons while they threw punches at her. Recalling this incident later to the anthropologist, she said: 'They called me a whore, they called me a witch, I remained silent, but when they grabbed my wrist and slapped me in front of everyone, I wailed and said to someone "return my small sons to me, they have become my husband, my father!"' When I asked Salima's sons about beating their mother they seemed convinced that Hindu lovers pretended to visit Muslim slum women for sexual favours, but the romance was a cover for gaining access into the area. 'These Hindu men draw maps for rioters to enter and loot the slums', said Salima's eldest son (12).

The boys' monitoring of morality in Sultanpur also involved trashing shops owned by Muslim men with inter-community business links; these acts of public violence affected delicate trade relations between Hindus and Muslims in the area. Muslim traders, who would usually chase away truant children from the bazaar, treated local boys to tea, biscuits and cool drinks when they were out on a patrol. Sadid, a popular bangle seller, told me how he turned away Hindu women from his shop after repeated intimidations. When probed more about these acts of 'punishment' most of the boys admitted that they chose their targets carefully. For example, they sought out and assaulted marginalized women with no protective male guardians, knowing well that the community would be unwilling to fight the child squads for women of disrepute. When in the market, the squads usually threatened shopkeepers selling glassware, cloth and other combustible goods ('Why waste time threatening a tarot card reader with Hindu clients?', said Taufiq, 9), as the latter would rather give up business relations than risk losing their stocks to unpredictable attacks from angry children. According to the vigilante boys, the attacks aimed to exhibit children's *capacity* for violence, and send out a warning to the community without killing its members.

Despite their notoriety, the boys distanced themselves from a number of activities that local people would normally associate with violent units, indicating to the community that they followed certain ethical standards. Similar to the child

vigilantes in Bombay, the boys' armies in Sultanpur claimed that they abstained from gang robberies even while attacking prosperous shops. Some boys feared prison sentences over burglaries; some others felt too fragile to compete with the economic mafia well established in the area. Hence the squads preferred an exalted status as soldiers (as against robbers and gangsters). Despite their attraction for 'warrior' terminologies, the boys refused to be celebrated as soldiers of Islam or *jehadis*. At public meetings and religious forums, spokespersons from local mosques and radical Muslim political leaders, especially from the Majlis, would interpret local child vigilantism as a form of *jehad* to contest Hindu supremacy in the Charminar constituency. Yet the male children felt safer to be disengaged from discourses around religio-nationalist labels. According to Dilbar (12), 'During the Mecca Masjid blast, young Muslim men were being arrested and people were shouting "beat the *jehadis*, beat the bastards". It's better to be called soldiers [*fauji sahi hain*].' Further, male children in the squads did not display an overt interest in capturing or seducing women, which was in contrast to the slum boys of Bombay, who spent time building bodies to woo women. Most studies on conventional gang behaviour emphasize the importance of sexualization and territorialization of violent gang activities, a vital rule for dividing and ruling marginalized city spaces (Alexander, 2000; Bourgois, 1996; Venkatesh, 2009). Scholars specifically exploring the dynamics of Muslim gangs in urban neighbourhoods show how the latter draw power and sustenance from upholding the sovereignty of Islam (Ewing, 2008; Hart, 2002; Matusitz and Repass, 2007). In Sultanpur, however, street patrolling and delivering social justice; the absence of territoriality and formal gang initiations; revulsion for sexual violence and looting; the distancing from religious labels – created a new culture of organized violence at the intersection of vigilantism, soldiering, neo-gangism and childhoods relegated to the fringes of urban life.

Inauspicious sons: Boy 'soldiering' and a challenge to the domestic space

The power of child vigilantes in the public sphere had a substantial impact on the nature of family dynamics in Sultanpur. Aging fathers of beaten women expressed their disillusionment with boy soldiers usurping the role of elders to chastise immoral women. Young brothers of women assaulted in public were angry, but reticent to challenge the erratic behaviour of armed children. Abu Karim, a slum dweller, said, 'I feel emasculated by my 12-year-old son [*bara saal ke ladke se saamne mein mard na raha*]'; living in fear of avenging attacks, he did not intervene when his son skived work or skipped school. Many fathers, like Abu Karim, felt they had been made redundant within the family as they could barely contribute to their boys' education in manners and manhood. In a reversal of roles, male children castigated community members and demanded reverence from traditional figures of male authority. Many young men in the family felt 'out-maled' by child soldiering, especially if they had vigilante brothers or cousins in the family.

The latter not only appropriated attention, but also confused young men about their honour within the slum locality. According to Aslam (20), who was keen to get married and start a small business in handicrafts, 'This is the time that *I* should be the hero in the street, not my younger brother. If I walk past him with a girl, I want to be able to slap him around, throw a *chappal* at him, and not the other way around. My wife will think I am castrated [*namard*] if my small brother beats my wife, my mother, and I am too scared to stop him.' Even elder sisters harassed by younger brothers (which did not always involve physical assaults; at times the boys urged young girls to wear a veil when stepping out into a Hindu-dominated public sphere) lamented the loss of affection in sibling relationships.

Male child brutality also had a deep impact on how women perceived the value of 'being mothers' in the slums. In addition to coping with domestic violence, communal rape and sexual harassment on the streets, most slum women had seen or survived violent male child soldiering. Several women had postponed celebrations after giving birth to male children, which usually gave poor women a hallowed position within the family. 'I thought it was auspicious to be the mother of a son', lamented Amina (41). Slum dwellers claimed that organized violence inflicted by 'informal' child armies prevented local women from carrying out roles as peace-makers, maternal healers, providers of food security and cultural anchors.¹¹ These obstacles in turn disallowed women from reconstructing family life through caring for children, and healing their social and sexual wounds after communal flare-ups. To recover their agency and break the cycle of male child violence, some women shattered fraternal relationships in order to protect pre-verbal male children from the influence of violent, older brothers. After failed negotiations with Amir, her elder son, Amina fled the slum with Amir's one-year-old brother to live with a distant cousin. When I met Amir, an esteemed member of the vigilante squad in his locality (now living with his father), he told me, 'Let her come back, *maad padeki* [she will get a beating].'

Most children in the squads, however, appeared to have little sympathy for women like Salima or Amina, or any kinship ties. Embittered vigilantes felt betrayed by their families, which could not provide enough food and care for small children. Ali (11) said: 'I don't know what happy childhood people talk about. My dad was a drunk, he beat everyone, we never had enough to eat. What's happy about that?' The conditions of conflict highlighted the failure of slum communities not only to save their cultural pride but also to protect children from injury and death. In addition, slum boys felt trapped into non-lucrative family trades in the bazaar areas, while they observed parts of Hyderabad being transformed through monumental yet elitist commercial projects. The alienation of poor children from mainstream professional jobs and their lack of familiarity with a rapidly changing urban landscape kept them confined within an informal slum economy where the community had no infrastructure to support upward mobility. Some local boys were shunted off to the Gulf as 'cheap labour', which left the children in Sultanpur more concerned about their depleting numbers. Exposure to these forms of material and moral abandonment, encouraged local children to draw some sense of power from labelling privileged

Hindus as their eternal enemies, and defenceless Muslim men and women as the enemy within. The activities of the boys, nevertheless, created a public debate about children's capacity to dismantle cultural authority, and distort discourses of social suffering in violence-prone slums.

'Just protecting their community': Propping up the status of boy soldiers

In Sultanpur, influential members of the community remained uncertain about the position of child vigilantes. A large body of research into children surviving within the cracks and crevices of global cities show how state and religious organizations remove and persecute uncontrolled children (Scheper-Hughes, 1984, 1987) who are an integral part of the 'meta-social demonology of urban deviance' (Frankland, 2007: 34). In Hyderabad, however, the local-level state machinery and the dominant mosques had discriminatory policies *in favour* of child gangs. The officer-in-charge of the Sultanpur police station gruffly dismissed my concern about the squads; suggesting that child soldiering to escape the threat of street deaths, was not the same as gang patrolling to maintain territorial war. Under this facade of apathy, the relationship between state actors and child squads in Sultanpur was complex, as some of the boys acted as police informants in exchange for unrestricted mobility on the streets. The child soldiers, thus, did not offer a direct challenge to the police-criminal-politician nexus in the area at all. This tolerance for 'alternative forms of governmentality' (Foucault, 1991) came to an end with the Mumbai terror attacks when the local police faced a rapid change in the political climate as well as pressure from the media and municipality to 'clean up' public places of armed Muslim youth cliques.¹² Even though the children distanced themselves from religious labels, local mosques did not criticize child violence as deviancy and celebrated vigilantism for the years that it remained active on the streets. Families in Sultanpur were clearly dissuaded from seeking help from the police or the mosques, since these institutions were resistant to suppression of child militancy. Thus, flexible police practices and religious sermons allowed the boy soldiers to assess their conduct as 'commendable'.

There were also prominent slum-dwellers who did not critique child soldiering. I met community elders who were proud of children's role as gatekeepers of the community. Many older women were satisfied that girls were not eloping with Hindu men in fear of the children. Alisha (50) was hopeful that that her 12-year-old son would mature out of this fascination with patrolling and get a job. Many people like Alisha implied to me that child soldiering entailed a *temporary* engagement with violent collective units, which would dissolve with age, mobility and changes in political agendas (which it did). In addition, vigilantes kept sexual practices detached from child violence, which often made them less reprehensible in the eyes of family members. Parents continued to view boy squad members as small in size, still playing games, and abstaining from financial engagement with religious or political leaders for personal gains. Several beaten women didn't abandon their sons and refused to

refer to them as 'lost cases'. Most significantly, however, the children who did not take part in vigilantism also propped up the superior status of violent children as more capable members of the community. Shakeel, 12, and a 'respected' soldier, once told me that the children who did not fight could be identified from hesitations in their speech, body language and mobility. 'Those boys try to skulk past us . . . look embarrassed', he said. These non-violent boys with their status anxieties evidently exposed the fragile and fragmented nature of male childhoods in the slums, and posed a challenge to the 'unified child world' being crafted by the vigilantes.

Some concluding comments

Scholars exploring the impact of communal violence and urban poverty on poor Muslims in South Asia view the experiences of 'unwanted children' (Das, 1995) through the lens of multiple victimologies (Jeffrey and Jeffrey, 2002; Robinson, 2005). Chatterjee and Mehta (2007) in their study of Muslim families affected by the 1992–1993 riots in Dharavi, a large slum in Bombay, contend that sustained communal clashes often lead to people's *withdrawal* from public places. The authors show how Muslim families lost their sense of familiarity and mobility on the streets of Dharavi and encouraged their children to negotiate urban spaces through distrust and a constant state of alert. In Clifford's approach to mapping city spaces: '... an urban neighbourhood may be laid out physically according to a street plan, but it is not a space until it is practiced by people's active occupation, their movements through and around it' (1997: 54). Chatterjee and Mehta argue that by the same reasoning, such spaces can also lead to extraordinary closures (2007: 24). My ethnography in Sultanpur has shown how the taut socio-political atmosphere in the locality was closing off the streets to poor children. But most slum boys were desperate to negotiate the public space for labour, fast cash, school, play and childhood friendships. My essay has highlighted the collective attempts made by Muslim boys to not only overcome their fear of communal tense public places, but also to *affirm* the charisma and movement of children within them. The boys' status as urban warriors dissuaded local people from indulging in everyday physical and symbolic violence against them, which in turn allowed some poor Muslim children to temporarily *enjoy* a childhood in poverty without being haunted by the fear of assaults and death. Despite the criticism and chaos around child violence, the active attempts made by vulnerable children to reclaim their lives on the streets inadvertently animated an otherwise muted neighbourhood.

During the years that the squads were active on the streets, they were deeply cognizant of the confinements of slum childhoods. For example, the boys were aware of the limits to their strength as they distanced themselves from gang-ism and neo-terrorism, which required greater physical abilities and local patronage. Even though they were endangering certain male power structures, violent assaults did not dislocate or reinvigorate 'traditional forms of virile masculinities' (Mehta, 2006: 20) – immoral women and unscrupulous traders were weak targets and already a source of discomfort within the ethical structures of post-conflict

slum life. In addition, child militancy evidently alienated feeble slum children who did not have the 'courage' to take on a challenging public role. So the confusion of the state and the community over the value of handing over the streets to whimsical child soldiers gave the boys only a small window of opportunity to repossess certain public places. What my ethnography does emphasize is the ways in which the phenomenon of child vigilantism created a new set of social relations, which allowed slum boys to give prominence to poor children's grievances. The practice of child vigilantism prevented diplomatic negotiations between Muslim slum dwellers and their Hindu neighbours; viewing the small body of a child dressed in arms reminded NGO workers that they had achieved little success in helping riot-affected children cope with their apprehensions; violent attacks by children resisted conventional knowledge about childhood and child vulnerability within the family; and the exhibition of ire challenged superficial narratives of amity in post-conflict situations. The image of the unforgiving child not only resisted public amnesia to past experiences of urban violence and victimhood, but contested an established cultural grammar of negotiating loss and bereavement, especially among women. The clustering of children's lives, their co-dependent activities and their calculated dominance over their own community was a strategy for poor Muslim children to uncover subversive yet effective paths of navigating terrains of urban terror.

This article also tells a tale of a slum acting as a point of articulation of complex relationships, which were closely related to urban politics, loss of judicial rule, uncaring family lives and unfettered redevelopment. It offers insights into the linkages of urban macro-processes (such as tense communal relations) not just with sub-cultures of violence (such as child vigilantism), but also with the fabric of human experience in poverty. Even though the riot-torn slum was a spatial template for the enactment of volatile social communication and emergence of overwrought political economies, my article shows how fissures and fractures in this urban drama created a small opportunity for poor children to return themselves to the city. When Arshed returned to Sultanpur from his visit to Hi-Tech city, the boys were out on their evening patrols. While crossing over a dirt road into his neighbourhood, he looked fed up and asked: '*Sheher mein jiye, is ko sahe, ya ise mitaye?* [shall we exist in the city, endure it or shall we erase it?]. Without waiting for an answer he vanished behind a maze of re-assembled shanties to find his group and enquire about his 'sunset duty'.

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Notes

1. For more information, visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_Mumbai_attacks.
2. Members of the collaboration chose to remain anonymous due the sensitive nature of this article's contents.

3. According to the Charminar Constituency Electoral Register, 48.1 percent of local votes were cast from the Sultanpur area in 2009.
4. These famous market areas, also known as *laad* (lacquer) or *churi* (bangle) bazaars, have been operating since the 16th century.
5. For detailed studies of communal relations in Hyderabad under Nizami sovereignty, see Copland (1988) and Kooiman (2002); for citizenship battles among Hyderabad Muslims, see Sherman (2010).
6. Majlis-e-ittihadul-muslimeen, a radical political party formed during the rule of the Nizam in the 1920s, was banned after Hyderabad's annexation. Years of linguistic and cultural battles between Hindus and Muslims in the old city led to the revival of the Majlis in 1957 (Wright, 1963).
7. The Indian state government encouraged Hindu refugees from Pakistan (after the Partition of the sub-continent in 1947) to settle in Hyderabad, primarily to dismantle the stronghold of local Muslims.
8. See online media reports on Ayodhya riots; Mecca Masjid, Charminar and Lumbini Park serial blasts at www.ndtv.com.
9. The Confederation of Voluntary Associations (COVA) is a peace-building organization in Hyderabad.
10. NGO reports showed how several missionary schools stopped admission of children from the old city, as the latter could not attend classes during riots.
11. These are socio-political roles typically attributed to women in post-conflict societies. For more details, see de Alwis (2008) and de Mel (2002).
12. The child squads were disbanded *after* I left the field so I don't offer a complex assessment of the demobilization process.

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